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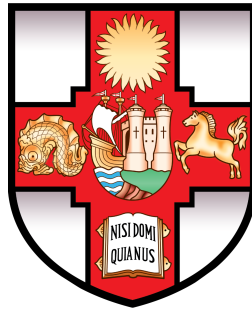
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North Korean Escapees' Unthinkable Journeys and the Conceptual Binaries of Migration Policy

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A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law.

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ABSTRACT

There is a lack of empirical interview data on escapees from North Korea and the aim of this thesis is to address this omission. At a theoretical level, this thesis is concerned with North Korean escapees' cross-border mobility to South Korea through a third country. It explores how North Koreans' migration, often popularly described as the 'Underground Railroad', is undertaken through smuggling networks, documenting both the process of smuggling and the structure of its networks. Although academic research and human rights agencies' reports have contributed to providing an overview of the plight of North Korean escapees, there has been very little empirical research on the actual migration experience of North Koreans. By conducting empirical research on the processes by which North Koreans move, and their lived experience throughout the migration process, my research addresses a gap in the academic research and literature on North Korean escapees. Empirical data on how and why North Koreans move across borders not only adds to the existing literature on North Koreans, but also draws attention to conceptual and theoretical weaknesses in dominant understandings of the line between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration. Focusing on the actors involved in the brokerage and smuggling networks that facilitate North Koreans' movement, this thesis highlights the complexities of 'smuggling' and shows how the category is far more complex than commonly assumed in either migration studies or popular discourse on the 'Underground Railroad'. Particular attention is paid to the broad and divergent range of interests and motivations of different actors who facilitate the cross border movement of North Koreans. In doing so, the thesis shows that the categories 'trafficking', 'smuggling', 'asylum-seeking' and 'migration' do not describe neatly bounded and fundamentally distinct types of movement. It critically questions the way in which the boundaries between human trafficking and smuggling, and between forced and voluntary migration are conceptualized in migration policy, much of academic literature on migration, and in international human rights law.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: DATE:.....

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Jung-whan Kook and Jung-Sook Lee who have made countless sacrifices in their own lives to that I could chase after my dreams. I am humbled by their grace, love, dedication and extraordinary courage.

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1. NORTH KOREAN ESCAPEES: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The Korean peninsula is located in East Asia and North Korea occupies the northern part of it, bordered by China and Russia along the river Yalu and Tumen rivers in Chinese side. It also shares land borders with these two countries to the north, while to the south, it borders South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea, along the heavily-fortified the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The DMZ has formed a de-facto border barrier between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and South Korea since the end of the Second World War (Kook, 2015).

Since the 1990s, political problems, economic crises and food shortages have all combined to provoke an exodus of desperate North Koreans into China in search of sustenance, employment and a better life (Kook, 2018:119-120). China, rather than other neighbouring countries such as Russia and South Korea, has attracted North Koreans for two main reasons. First, it is the product of geographic proximity and accessibility (Kim J, 2010). North Korea is bordered by China along the river Yalu and Tumen rivers which are respectively accessible to cross by foot or by swimming. The borders with Russian and South Korea are far more challenging to cross. A second reason why North Koreans choose to cross to China is to be found in their ethnic connection with the Korean-Chinese community. Yanbian Autonomous Korean Prefecture in China where the largest concentrations of ethnic Korean-Chinese nationals reside, is very close to the border with North Korea. The Korean-Chinese living in the Yanbian, the so-called Joseon jok, have been sympathetic to mass starvation in North Korea due to their blood ties, and as a result, once North Koreans cross the border to China, they can seek food, work, and shelter with relatives or even strangers who are Korean-Chinese in the Yanbian.

The precise number of North Koreans who have sought refuge, economic benefits, and relative freedom in China and beyond is unknown. Some estimate that there are somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 North Koreans in China. However, in the early 2000s, there were many other, and very different estimates; the South Korean government put the number

at 30,000; the Chinese government estimated 10,000; the US State Department estimated 75,000-125,000 (US State Department, 2006); and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated 50,000-100,000 (Lankov, 2004:859; Song, 2013:401). These different estimates of the numbers of North Koreans reflects the fact of their illegal status in China. They are hidden from public and invisible from any official forms of monitoring, making it virtually impossible to accurately gauge their number.

The illegal status of North Koreans in China is created by the immigration policies and laws of both their origin and receiving countries. North Korea is a Stalinist and totalitarian country governed by the dictatorship of the Kim family, and its residents are denied basic rights to freedom of movement. The government closely controls the mobility of its people by allocating their residence and authorising their travel abroad only in very exceptional cases. Because it is virtually impossible to obtain authorization from the North Korean government to leave North Korea, it is also impossible for most ordinary North Koreans to go through the processes necessary and obtain the necessary papers to enter China legally. Those who cross the border into China are thus regarded as criminals in the both countries.

Although North Koreans are classified as refugees under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (Kim M, 2010:424), the Chinese government has prioritized its 1986 repatriation agreement with North Korea, and therefore approaches North Koreans as illegal economic migrants, not refugees, and deports North Korean escapees back to North Korea (Margesson et al., 2007). This policy is partly due to China's negative political and economic relations with other countries, especially South Korea and the United States (Kivisto and Faist, 2000:223), and partly due to China's concerns about the potential cost of the welfare burden that North Korean migrants might present (Lankov, 2004:872-3).

North Koreans who are deported/repatriated are severely punished. Sanctions can include the death penalty or a sentence served in one of the dreaded concentration camps or prisons of North Korea. The fact that prisoners are subject to forced labour, beating, torture, starvation and human experimentation is well documented (Davis, 2006:134-5). As a consequence, North Koreans in China are extremely reluctant to be repatriated to their country and this leaves them highly susceptible to exploitation, degrading treatment and abuse.

In China, all North Koreans are vulnerable to the possibility of arrest and repatriation. Some learn of the possibility of continuing their journey to South Korea but very few successfully reach that destination. Some also become aware of the option of going to a Western country, such as the United States. North Korean escapees usually obtain information about

traveling to other countries through their families, relatives, and friends who have already settled in South Korea, or through missionaries and NGOs in China. In some rare cases, they find out through the Internet.

More than 70% of the North Koreans who have managed to make it to South Korea are women, and in 2017, the total number of those was around 31,000. Annually around 1,000 North Koreans reach South Korea (SKMU, 2017). Though 30,000 is a great many people, if the estimate that there are 300,000 North Koreans in China is correct, it is only ten percent of them. This suggests that the vast majority of North Korean escapees remain stuck in China.

There is an academic research literature on North Koreans' migration (Davis, 2006; Chang et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2009; Kim J, 2010; Kim M, 2010; Lankov, 2004). These studies have taken two main approaches to North Korean escapees. First, there are studies that focus on the causes of migration from North Korea to other countries. This research explains that chronic food shortages, political repression and poverty have caused a mass influx of North Korean escapees into China (Chang et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2001; Woo et al., 2005). They also argue that economic crisis was provoked by political isolation related to 'nuclear weapons': South Korea, the United States and Japan stopped providing support to North Korea from the mid-1990s to 2003 (Hecker, 2010). Second, there are studies that emphasise the legal protections to which North Koreans are entitled outside of their country. More specifically, this research provides an overview of the situation of North Korean asylum seekers and analyses the legal protection available to North Korean escapees under international law (Chan and Schloenhardt, 2007; Wolman, 2013). Chan and Schloenhardt (2007) explore the significance of understanding what North Korean refugee status means in practice in China, which is considered the most popular transit country. Wolman (2013) also shows that North Korean escapees have been granted the status of refugees in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

In addition to international law and academic research, reports from international human right groups, such as Human Rights Watch (2002), Anti-Slavery International (Muico, 2005), and Refugees International (Charny, 2005), provide understanding of the human rights crisis facing North Koreans. These humanitarian groups have reported that North Korean escapees in China are involved in various forms of slavery, such as forced marriage, forced labour, trafficking and slavery-like practice, describing them as 'modern slaves' (Muico, 2005:3). Their lives are described as 'worse than death' in one report, titled 'The Invisible Exodus: North Koreans in the People's Republic of China' (Human Right Watch 2002:5). Such reports

have raised public awareness of North Koreans' desperate circumstances and vulnerability, and encouraged an understanding of their cross border movement as 'forced migration'.

Although academic research and human rights agencies' reports have contributed to providing an overview of the plight of North Korean escapees, there has been very little empirical research on the actual migration experience of North Koreans. By conducting empirical research on North Koreans' migration process, this thesis therefore addresses a gap in the academic literature.

1.2 *Research trajectory*

After the Kim Il-sung era ended with his death in 1994, a great famine began in North Korea in which many people, particularly children, died of starvation and diseases caused by malnutrition. Over the next few years, a number of North Koreans crossed the border into China in search of food, and which brought a new awareness of the reality of conditions in the North to South Korea. As a junior in high school in South Korea, I often watched North Korean children on various media, and their narratives prompted questions of myself and the society to which I belonged, the first of which was "Why are people not giving food when others are dying?" A well-known Korean proverb advises to "share with others even a small bean," which in cultural context means that it is necessary to help each other to break through difficult times together. However, in my view, this belief was not being manifested in many of South Korea's activities or policies towards North Koreans. Although the Kim Dae-jung government attempted to send food to North Korea in 1997 through the Sunshine Policy, it faced fierce opposition from conservative politicians and a large proportion of the public. The controversy appeared contradictory to me - as a national song called "Unification, Our Wish" reflects, the re-unification of the two Koreas has been a long-cherished wish for many Korean people; however, when North Korea desperately needed food aid, South Korea could not seem to provide an adequate response.

With these thoughts in mind, I joined a student group called Support for Compatriots in North Korea, thereby joining other high school and college students and campaigning for provisions of canned-food, clothes, and funding for North Koreans. I participated in the group's activities for about two years until I was confronted by a teacher who regarded the group as a "enemy-benefiting community" and warned that I would be expelled from school if my membership continued. At that time, according to South Korea's National Security Law, "enemy-benefiting" activities were equated with praising communism in North Korea and/or disruptive to the democratic order in South Korea. Later, as I was exposed to and developed

critical perspectives towards various social issues during my university studies in sociology, I realized that the government had introduced such national security legislation to prohibit any activities related to North Korea as a means to pursue advantage in an ideological competition driven by the fear that learning more about North Korea's communist-socialist system might lead South Koreans to prefer it to their own capitalist society.

During my postgraduate studies in South Korea, I encountered similarly hostile attitudes towards any research related to North Korea among academia and the wider society, who agreed with my teacher in regarding such activities as enemy-benefiting. The atmosphere within South Korean academia has long been such that a researcher may be regarded as a communist unless North Korea is negatively characterized in their work. In particular, since the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945 until the pro-democracy movement of the late 1980s, also known as the June Struggle, the military dictatorial government of South Korea prohibited all academic studies on North Korean regime, ideology, and communism in general. Scholarly analyses of these topics were illegal and regarded as traitorous, and those involved in such activities could face torture and imprisonment. In fact, the hostile social atmosphere towards North Korea and related subjects that developed over several decades has only gradually been transformed since the introduction of institutional democracy in 1987.

A noticeable shift in such attitudes began in the 2000s, when the number of North Korean escapees in South Korea began to increase considerably. South Korean academics and the wider public condemned the repression of human rights under the North Korean dictatorship that had led so many to seek escape from starvation. The same stance has been shared by a large portion of right-wing politicians in South Korea and many Western journalists. Thus, academic research and policymaking related to North Korea and its escapees became a priority in the South. The initial focus was largely on social welfare benefits and gradually evolved to include considerations on how to integrate North Korean escapees into society.

The aforementioned academic climates have not encouraged a great deal of independent studies of North Korea that extend beyond political analyses, which contributes to my motivation to conduct the current research with a main focus on North Korean escapees, specifically to document how they lived in North Korea, how they escaped, and how their lives have been since settling in the South.

For safety reasons, I exclusively interviewed escapees who now live in South Korea rather than including those who have settled in China. North Korean escapees in China are reluctant to be exposed, as they are recognized as illegal migrants, and encounters with South

Korean researchers could particularly risk their security. In addition, those who provide aid to North Korean escapees are subject to punishment in China. Another advantage of the chosen location is that South Korea is the final destination for most North Korean escapees because they can gain citizenship there. Therefore, there are better opportunities to hear their narratives concerning their journey. Moreover, since most of these individuals have lived in South Korea for a considerable period of time, any shifts in their experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and social awareness could also be explored to potentially extend the scope of the research.

1.3 Research purpose and research question

The central aim of this thesis is to document the lived experience of North Koreans now living in South Korea, in particular, their experience of mobility and immobility in the course of movement from North to South. Based on interview research with North Korean escapees and others involved in smuggling networks (professional brokers, NGOs, missionaries, and family members), the thesis attempts to tease out the complexities of their ‘migration’, and to show how their experience cannot readily be captured by the conceptual binaries and categories used to classify human mobility in dominant policy and human rights discourse. The research reported in the thesis explored the multiple factors that led to my North Korean interviewees’ travel to South Korea, and the broad and divergent range of interests and motivations of different actors who assist North Koreans in their cross-border movement. It also examined the points at which my interviewees were immobilized, sometimes for long periods of time, by both state and non-state actors. These data suggest, I will argue, that the categories ‘trafficking’, ‘smuggling’, ‘asylum-seeking’ and ‘migration’ do not neatly describe my interviewees’ movement. At a theoretical level, the thesis aims to add to the literature that critically questions the way in which the boundaries between human trafficking and smuggling, and between forced and voluntary migration are conceptualized in migration policy, much of academic literature on migration, and in international human rights law.

The key research questions addressed in the thesis are therefore:

1. To what extent does the lived experience of North Korean migrants fit with the conceptual binaries that shape dominant discourse on migration, i.e., the assumed oppositions between forced and voluntary, between economic migrants and political refugees, between slavery and freedom, and between trafficking and smuggling?
2. So far as the concepts of ‘trafficking’ and ‘smuggling’ are concerned, what does empirical

data on the networks through which North Koreans' migration is arranged, and the motivations of the actors involved, tell us about the assumed distinctions between the two? Is it possible or meaningful to distinguish between involuntary and voluntary, and non-agential and agential forms of movement in the North Korean context?

3. How does gender affect migrants' ability to move, their experience on route and the relationships that surround their movement?
4. North Koreans' journeys to South Korea are rarely immediate or instantaneous, but rather entail a process of movement through time and different states as well across space. How does that movement through time and states affect escapees lived experience? The thesis therefore examines the different experiences of North Korean escapees as they stayed in China as illegal migrants, in Russia as guest workers, and in South Korea as citizens.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is organized as follows.

Chapter two explores relevant historical and geopolitical context with the role of United States and China and also introduces the literature review on North Korean's migration to China. It then proceeds to discuss terminology and classifications of North Koreans in South Korea and an explanation for the term, North Korean escapees, has been chosen in this dissertation. Finally, it discusses 'refugee' and 'economic migrant' binary.

Chapter three sets out the research design and methods employed to gather the data on which the thesis is based. It also discusses the important ethical issues associated with this research, including the duty to bear witness. My interviewees wanted their stories told, especially their accounts of torture, which are presented in Chapter four. Here, testimonies of North Korean escapees about their suffering and torture in North Korea are set out. My interviewees were insistent that I should include this testimony in my thesis, and its inclusion is thus honouring an ethical commitment to some extent. However I also believe that it is important for the reader to grasp the enormity of the horror my interviewees had experienced, since that horror is absolutely central to understanding the data on their agency and mobility that is presented in the following chapters. I have attempted present my interviewees' experiences of suffering as much as possible in their own words.

Chapter five focuses on how North Koreans make the border crossing into China, and explores the highly gendered nature of that experience. It also begins to unpack the complexity

of the brokerage and smuggling networks that facilitate North Korean women's movement, and in so doing, highlights the fact that the legal and discursive distinction between 'trafficking' and 'smuggling' fails to grasp the experience of the women that I interviewed.

Chapter six explores North Korean women's experience of marriage to Chinese men. Drawing on my interviewees' narratives, I critically discuss the concept of 'forced marriage', which is represented as a form of 'modern slavery' by antislavery activists and anti-trafficking campaigners.

Chapter seven turns to the complexities of North Korean men's lived experience of highly exploitative forms of labour in Russia and China. It continues to interrogate the idea of "force" and to question the lines drawn around forced and voluntary labour that are central to trafficking and modern slavery discourse.

Chapter eight is concerned to show that conceptual boundary troubles do not end when people cross the border into South Korea. The position of North Koreans in South Korea remains ambiguous. They are in theory citizens not refugees, yet they are popularly viewed as "foreign" by other, South Korean citizens, and they subjectively experience themselves as Other, as people who do not "belong". And where in the dominant NGO discourse, North Koreans are "slaves" in North Korea and "free" in South Korea, many of my interviewees did not experience living in South Korea as liberation. The chapter continues to interrogate the complexities of consent and agency in the journeys of North Koreans, documenting the cases in which elderly North Koreans have been kidnapped and taken to South Korea against their will by their own children, a phenomenon that further illustrates the limitations of dominant assumptions about "trafficking" and smuggling and forced and voluntary movement.

Chapter nine concludes with a discussion that draws together theoretical points about the conventional binaries of trafficking/smuggling, forced/voluntary, victim/agent, citizens/migrants and slavery/freedom; and considers what a focus on North Korean migrants can add to the migration literature.

2. NORTH KOREAN ESCAPEES: BACKGROUND, HISTORY AND TERMINOLOGY

In this chapter, I first explore the historical and geo-political context of North Koreans' migration, including the roles of the United States and China, before I review the literature on North Korea and movements of its residents to the latter country. The chapter then proceeds to a discussion of migration to South Korea and terminology and classifications of North Koreans there. Finally, I will examine conceptual and theoretical problems presented by the case of North Koreans' mobility. The latter discussion introduces a key argument of the thesis, namely, that although North Koreans' border-crossing has been conceptualized as 'forced migrations' in international laws, migration policies, academic research, and humanitarian groups' reports, empirical evidence on their movements highlights the fuzzy boundaries between 'voluntary' and 'forced' migration. I will argue that these binaries do not capture the complexity of North Koreans' migration experiences.

2.1 Historical and Geopolitical Context

At the end of World War II, the Korean Peninsula was divided into two regions - the land north of 38 degrees was overseen by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), whereas the area south of that line was controlled by the United States. After three years of separate military regimes, the two sides failed to unify, and each established its own government. In 1948, with the active support of the Soviet Union and China, Kim Il-sung set up a new communist state in the north, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), based on the Marxist-Leninism of self-reliance. In the same year, the southern Republic of Korea was established with the support of the Western countries. The two sides engaged in the Korean War between 1950 and 1953, have been in a state of truce since then. Officially, they are recognized as two different states, which are bordered by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The North continued to receive support from the world's communist countries, most notably the Soviet Union and China, whereas the South has been bolstered by capitalist countries, particularly the United States. Thus, the Cold War began in the Korean Peninsula, which

heightened geopolitical tensions in East Asia.

From the mid-1950s to the 1960s, North Korea abandoned Leninism and laid the foundation for ‘Juche’ (self-reliance) as a national ideology. Juche ideology aims to diminish the influences of imperialism and promotes full self-determination over facing and solving national problems in all of its dimensions, including economy, politics, defense, diplomacy, ideology, and culture, among others. Juche was introduced into the Constitution of 1972 and has since been the sole ruling ideology of the country (Constitution of North Korea, 1972). However, although the North Korean Constitution manifested Juche as an independent nationalism of imperialism, the ideology was in fact enacted to strengthen the power, monopoly, idolization, and rule of the Kim family. In the 1980s, a subject theory bolstering the Kim family’s monopoly was more explicitly systematized, and two supportive sub-theories were later added, namely the reception of the revolutionary leader and social and political life-theory (UNIEDU, 2019). The former defines loyalty to the regime as unconditionally following the leader and the latter emphasizes that individuals acquire eternal life by engaging with the organization centered on the leader. Kim Il-sung, who was the ruler of North Korea at the time, needed such a hegemony in order to successfully pass on the office to his son, Kim Jong-Il.

North Korea’s ruling power based on Juche theory as its governing ideology revolves around its leader. This dictatorship has created a totalitarian society that severely limits the autonomy of its people, and the party headed by the Kim family is the only political union allowed in the country. The North Korean people are compelled to obey their supreme leader as an absolute being who embodies all administrative, legislative, and judiciary powers. North Koreans’ basic rights are consequently infringed upon throughout their daily lives, including restrictions on voting and political activities, and limited freedom of movement, residence, choice of occupation, and ideology and religion. In addition, unlawful arrests, detentions, and torture routinely violate their human rights. Above all, the basic right to life is not protected. Food is distributed by the state according to the recipient’s sociopolitical class, which is mostly determined by birth. Thus, the lower the class, the more likely one is to be exposed to deteriorated environments, harsh physical labor, and the consequences of any food shortages. Despite ongoing and intensive criticisms by the United Nations and multiple countries, North Korea has justified its human rights violations by asserting that its dictatorship represents ‘our own socialism’ system based on the Juche ideology.

However, Juche ideology’s emphasis on self-sufficiency has not fulfilled the country’s economy needs. During the Cold War, North Korea received aid from the Communist bloc,

with which it shared political bonds as a socialist state. In particular, the Soviet Union and China supported electricity generation and the exploitation of underground resources such as coal and oil for economic development. As more than half of its topography is mountainous and therefore unsuitable for agriculture, North Korea was also dependent on its allies for crop imports. In 1949, China began official diplomatic relationships with North Korea and continued to support the country politically and economically during and after the Korean War. The two nations established close ties under the slogan ‘we fought together in the Korean War,’ and China played a protective role as North Korea’s ‘big brother.’ Until China and South Korea established diplomatic ties in 1992, the Chinese government recognized North Korea as the only legitimate regime in the peninsula due to their shared border and mutual membership in the Communist bloc.

However, North Korea’s position began to decline after Germany reunified in 1990 and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1992, thus marking the end of the Cold War. North Korea began to realize that the political and economic structures of neighboring countries had become markedly less favorable, and when China established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1991, its government began implementing a more balanced strategy for the two Koreas. With China’s shift to a market economy, its exclusive bonds with North Korea became less tenable and the government changed its strategy to take advantage of its relations with both Koreas. As economic aid from China and the Soviet Union alliances was essentially cut off, and severe floods and extreme droughts ensued, North Korea’s economic situation deteriorated and the country began experiencing devastating food shortages. The economic hardship began in the early 1990s and reached its peak from 1994–1998 during a period commonly referred to as the ‘Arduous March’ or the ‘March of Suffering.’ The record shows that an unprecedented famine during this period resulted in death by starvation for between 220,000 and 350,000 people and led to a significant increase in irregular crossings to China, particularly among people living near the border (Good Friends, 2004).

The North Korean government realized that it would have to reorganize its diplomatic relations in order to overcome these economic hardships. The country’s isolation had significantly worsened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as it became evident that the United States, with which North Korea’s had remained hostile, had begun to form a unipolar order in the world (Ikenberry et al., 2011). North Korea attempted to improve relations with the US, Japan, and South Korea, which led to fruitful outcomes to an extent, particularly in the latter case. An official summit with South Korea was held in 2000, and through the South Korean government’s so-called ‘Sunshine Policy,’ the North began receiving food aid

and that diplomatic relationship also gradually improved. On the other hand, there still did not seem to be sufficient interest in or trust toward North Korea from the US and Japan (Oberdorfer, 2001), and the government switched their strategy to prioritize elevating the country's military power, including a nuclear program (Hwang, 2017). The First and Second Nuclear Crises in 1993 and 2002, respectively, were stimulated by North Korea's pressing aim for its military program to become level with the US and thereby gain a better position in any negotiations. However, North Korea's nuclear development activities also deteriorated its relationship with China and marked the end of that nation's hitherto unconditional support, as the Chinese government adamantly opposed North Korea's nuclear testing as a threat to peace in East Asia (Shin, 2017).

The United States responded more aggressively than China to North Korea's nuclear program, imposing economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation as well as leading a chorus of international condemnations on ethical grounds. North Korea's nuclear program and human rights violations have since received abundant attention from media throughout the world, and a new framing was formed that highlighted its dangerous nuclear weapon development and other evils. In particular, when the United States announced the war against terrorism after the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001 (9/11), North Korea was officially regarded among its enemies on the international stage, as the United States framed North Korea as an axis of evil that routinely and callously violated human rights, peace, and democracy (Armstrong, 2004). The US government has since devoted significant efforts toward exposing and calling for international attention to human rights violations in North Korea. For example, the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 was passed in the US House of Representatives. However, while the government's interest in North Korea has been purported to protect democracy and human rights, the number of North Korean refugees and asylum seekers accepted in the US since 2004 is approximately 100, which is comparatively very small - for example, the United Kingdom has received more than 700 (UNHCR, 2016). Such disjunctures between rhetoric and humanitarian policies have led to widespread criticisms that the 2004 law was merely a political action implemented to enhance the United States' international reputation and which was not followed by sufficient practical actions (Boettcher, 2006). North Korea's initial response to US-led economic sanctions and international criticism was to engage in additional nuclear tests and further expand its military in 2006–2007. However, these actions only increased the country's political isolation. Up until the mid-2000s, the region of Rajin-Sonbong had been designated as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and the North Korean government had attempted to boost their economy with

increased trade with foreign countries. However, the nuclear tests resulted in halving the food aid from South Korea and China, which in turn led to increased economic deterioration and food shortages. The declining conditions are reflected in the trending numbers of North Korean escapees, which had been decreasing in the early 2000s but rose again after food shortages intensified in 2008. North Korea requested that the Chinese government repatriate North Korean escapees who had settled in the latter country, which ultimately increased their flows to South Korea, which had begun permitting such migrations in the 1990s. In 2009, the annual number of North Korean escapees who entered South Korea reached a peak of 2,900 people.

China's cooperation in repatriating escapees indicates that whereas it opposes North Korea's nuclear development, it supports the government and its regime more broadly. In other words, despite international pressure to accept and support North Korean escapees, China has adopted a position of strategic ambiguity. Although China verified the UN Refugee Convention, it does not recognize North Korean escapees as refugees and they are regularly repatriated to North Korea according to the 1986 Mutual Cooperation Protocol for the Work of Maintaining National Security and Social Order and the Border Areas. In other words, the Chinese government, for which North Korea's geopolitical value as a buffer zone apparently exceeds the problems caused by its nuclear program, has continued to provide the latter with economic cooperation, aid, and political and diplomatic support, thereby maintaining the stability of the North Korean regime as well as its own influence over regional conditions.

China's rapid economic and military upsurge in the 21st century has challenged the US unipolar order and sparked a competitive atmosphere between the two countries, which has meant yet another geopolitical power shift for the Korean Peninsula in the period following World War II and the subsequent Korean War (Kang, 2007). US-China contention is no longer an ideological rivalry as in the Cold War era, but rather rooted in economic and geopolitical competition (Mead, 2014). Many countries have been impacted by the new global political structure and the two Koreas are no exception (Hwang, 2013). As an ideological approach has become less effective and supportable, North Korea has changed its strategy for dealing with the US accordingly, exhibiting a willingness to engage at official summits rather than with military responses. In 2018 and early 2019, three summits were held between South and North Korea and two between North Korea and the US concerning the potential dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons, removal of economic sanctions, and forging of new diplomatic and economic relationships with other countries in general. These meetings have not yet borne fruit in the form of visible achievements; however, it is notable that

North Korea has exhibited a positive attitude towards negotiations as well as great interest in opening their markets and economic turnaround.

Amidst these diplomatic improvements, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' (FAO) recent report, approximately 10 million people in North Korea - or approximately 40% of the total population - were malnourished in 2015 (FAO, 2018). The decline in the domestic economy and food productivity is one cause of the country's food security problems; however, North Korea's dependence on support from neighboring countries is considered to be a more significant factor. When its diplomatic relations deteriorate and North Korea fails to receive sufficient aid, the entire economy of the country is negatively and severely impacted. In this context, as in the 1990s, North Korean escapees continue to illegally move to China to gain access to food and jobs; however, as illegal migrants, they are highly vulnerable to exploitation as well as the fear of repatriation, which motivates them to move further along to South Korea, where they can obtain citizenship and civil rights are granted.

2.2 Literature Review

In this section, I will focus on studies published since the 1990s that are relevant to the main topics of the thesis, i.e., human rights violations and North Korean escapees' journeys.

As a totalitarian dictatorship, North Korea has been rather a mystery to the international community, and only limited information has been available to those outside the country. However, after the severe famine in the 1990s, more information and discourses began to appear through journalistic writings, NGO reports, books, and academic journal articles, although there are still only handful of the latter (Armstrong, 2011).

Due to the hostile atmosphere within South Korean society towards North Korea following the Korean War, even academic research on the latter had not been well-received until the Sunshine Policy was initiated by Kim Dae-jung's presidency in 1998. Academic research on North Korea has only gradually emerged in South Korea; thus, although some of the literature I refer to are in Korean, most are English language sources.

Rather than attempting to glean a deeper understanding of the society, most literature on North Korea and its people, whether in English and/or Korean, has been concentrated on its famines, human rights violations, national security, and/or diplomatic relations - particularly the impact of the country's nuclear program on its relations with countries such as the US and China and how those nations should respond. Academic studies based on ground data have generally focused on nuclear issues, although, as demonstrated below, a few articles

have examined the human rights of North Koreans.

Political science scholars have generally described the North Korean regime as being at the opposite pole to Western liberal democracy in terms of its totalitarian character and violations of the human rights of its people. Some analysts have proposed that the core of the regime is a mixture of Marxism-Leninism, totalitarianism, and militarism as well as feudal Confucian traditions and the Kim family's political dominance (Song, 2010). Under such circumstances, North Korean people are obliged to call their leader 'the Father Sooryungnim,' meaning the great leader, and those who do not follow his commands are recognized as political defectors or victims.

In contrast, studies in international relations have mainly dealt with North Korea's diplomatic relations aimed at improving human rights issues, particularly, financial and food support on the basis of North Korea's relationships with the US, China, and South Korea. Those considering the issue from the perspective of international law have also focused on human rights of North Koreans outside North Korea. More scholarly works in this area appeared after the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 was passed in the US House of Representatives. In addition to introducing the new law and exploring its implications, such discussions have also debated its practical effects. Similarly, South Korea passed the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2016 under international pressure for the government to take more measures to improve human rights for North Koreans. However, international law scholars have argued that South Korea and the US have primarily been focused on North Korea's nuclear weapons programs and military exercises rather than providing sufficient economic supports, which has further isolated North Korea in the world political arena and has not been effective in resolving the issue of human rights (Ulferts and Howard, 2017). As noted in section 2.1, some scholars have charged that the 2004 act was generally limited to framing an image of US efforts to reform the North Korean regime or improving North Koreans' human rights without corresponding practical measures (Boettcher, 2006). Chang (2006) pointed out that practical effects of the law would require persistent political and humanitarian efforts as well as policymaking.

Studies based on international human rights laws in accordance with the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugee have discussed whether and how North Koreans are recognized as refugees and/or asylum seekers in different countries. As I will examine in further detail in the next section, some scholarly works have depicted the movements of North Koreans as forced migrations and claimed that such people should be recognized as refugees. Analysts have criticized the irregular status of North Koreans in China and noted

that refugee status was not granted to North Koreans in Canada despite their eligibility under the Protection Act (Kim M, 2010). Wolman (2013) argued that the fact that citizenship is granted in South Korea conflicts with the stricter conditions required for obtaining refugee status via South Korea in third countries such as Canada, the US, or Britain. As will be discussed in depth in Chapter 5, some researchers have examined gendered elements of North Koreans' movements to China and argued that North Korean women marrying Chinese men through brokerage constitutes a form of human trafficking.

Relevant academic research in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences has mainly focused on cases of North Korean people who have settled in South Korea. Psychology studies have examined the traumatic experiences of North Koreans due to political repression, famine, and their migration/escape journeys, and considered ways to enhance their psychological stability to enable them to better adapt and integrate into South Korean society (Chae, 2016; Keum, 2015; Lee and Han, 2015). A number of sociology and social policy studies have delved into social conflicts and problems with integration due to an increasing influx of North Korean people into South Korean society, with a particular emphasis on recommending social policies and programs to help overcome socio-cultural differences (Kim et al., 2011; Seol et al., 2018). Across disciplines, such studies have generally emphasized the need for North Koreans to assimilate into South Korean society rather than examining the bilateral interactions of migrants and host communities, which raises the criticism that scholars have regarded North Korean escapees as 'objects' of welfare programs who cause social problems in the communities where they settle.

In the context of such critiques, Choo (2006) showed that although legal citizenship is granted to North Koreans who settle in South Korea, they continue to experience social exclusion, which is also gendered, despite their desire to become integrated members of South Korean society. Markus Bell (2013) similarly demonstrated forms of exclusion encountered by North Koreans. Whereas Choo focused on sociological differences between North and South Koreans, as an anthropologist, Bell emphasized cultural differences and partly attributed migrants' social exclusion to the lack of trust between the South Korean government and North Korean escapees. Anthropologists have tended to be more concerned with North Koreans' direct experiences than scholars in other disciplines and thus have collected and analyzed their oral testimonies. For example, Fahy (2012, 2015) interviewed North Korean survivors of the March of Suffering (1994–1998) and reported on their accounts of their experiences and survival of the food crisis in their own voices. She evaluated that the famine was rooted in political violence rather than simple economic failure.

Analyses in other areas of social sciences have provided statistical data concerning malnutrition and related deaths and attributed the food crisis to economic failure due to the fall of the Soviet Union and failures in food distributions. Such studies have proposed solutions based on improved diplomatic relations including food aid. However, anthropologists have concentrated on individual rather than group experiences, and such insights and differentiation have led to a deeper understanding of the issues facing North Korean refugees. Moreover, whereas research in political science and international relations has depicted North Korea as an enemy and aimed to reduce conflict, anthropological studies have shed light on North Korea as a “different” society and focused on elucidating the distinctions as a means of providing an alternative views on North Korea’s culture and society (see Ryang, 2009).

Journalists have similarly used testimonies to report the direct experiences of refugees as a means to achieve a better understanding of their lives and North Korean society. American journalist Barbara Demick (2010) vividly described the lived experiences of North Koreans in her book *Nothing to Envy*, which is based on the life stories of six North Koreans whom she interviewed. Each character described their suffering under discriminatory class systems, economic failure, and loss of family members as motivating them to escape to China as a survival strategy. Demick illustrated the ironic situation whereby the regime has deceived its people with propaganda while they have experienced the depredations of malnutrition and the absence of freedom in a totalitarian and dictatorial state. As such, her work highlights various facets of North Korean society based on lived experiences as opposed to the superficially sensationalistic approaches seen in other journalistic writings and Western media in particular (see Mceachern, 2010), or the somewhat simplistic listing of facts related to North Korea from an outsider’s viewpoint (see French, 2015). Research such as that conducted by Bell, Fahy, and Demic highlights the need for more consideration of the direct testimonies of North Korean people as a means to better understand their experiences.

As an increasing number of North Koreans have moved to South Korea since the mid-2000s, some have been publishing their own testimonies. According to Gauthier (2015), such books fall into three categories: 1) what the upper classes in North Korea remember about the society to which they used to belong; 2) what North Koreans speak about life in North Korea in relation to famine and escape; and 3) terrifying experiences and memories of prisons, labor camps and political camps. For example, in *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* (2001) by Kang Chol-hwan and *Long Road Home* (2009) by Kim Yong, the authors recalled their experiences in labor camps, where they endured forced labor and torture for over 10 years. The most common theme of such testimonies is their escape journeys from North

Korea to South Korea (for example, see Kim and Falletti, 2015; Park and Vollers, 2015; Jang and McClelland, 2015; Lee and John, 2015), which have provided critical information and evidence that contribute developing better understandings of North Korean society and its people, which otherwise would have remained closed to the outside world.

This section has described academic articles, journalistic writings, and books devoting particular attention to North Koreans' direct experiences and journeys to escape from North Korea. In summary, the majority of academic literature has focused on analyzing the causes of human rights violations in North Korea, the characteristics of its dictatorship and economic failures, and exploring potential resolutions such as the improvement of diplomatic relations and compliance with international laws. However, scholarly works describing the lived experiences of North Korean people remain scarce and generally limited to anthropology. Although many journalists' accounts of North Koreans' narratives and memoirs written by North Koreans contain vivid descriptions of their experiences, such works are not as systematic, analytic, or sophisticated as academic articles. Therefore, in this thesis, I will use empirical data to examine the migration experiences of North Koreans in order to fill the gaps in the present literature including journalistic writings, NGO reports, books, and academic journal articles.

2.3 Terminology and Classifications of North Koreans in South Korea

This section will elucidate changes in social definitions of North Koreans who have settled in South Korea and then discuss related terminology and classifications in the social and political contexts of South Korean society. In particular, it focuses on the general response of the South Korean government and citizens towards North Koreans over time and how they reflect dominant discourses. In doing so, I will explain the reasons why the term "North Korean escapees" is considered most appropriate based on their voices and self-identification.

After the Korean War from 1950–1953, the Korean Peninsula was divided into two countries dominated by Cold War era conflicts positioning the Soviet-backed communist regime in the North against the US-sponsored capitalist government in the South. In this context of intensive competition, even migration was interpreted as a political act. For example, in April 1962, the military dictatorship of South Korea publicly praised North Korean soldiers who had moved to the South as heroes and patriots, and they were granted enormous financial rewards and other benefits under the "Special Relief Act for Patriots and Heroes Who Returned to the State" (*guggayugongja mich wolnam gwisunjateugbyeol wonhobeob* in Korean). When senior civil servants and diplomats from North Korea began to move to

the South in the 1970s, the Special Relief Act was reformed to the “Compensation Act for Heroes Who Returned” (*wolnamgwisun-yongsa teugbyeol bosangbeob* in Korean). Such migrants were referred to as political defectors and featured in propaganda condemning North Korea’s socialist political system. Amidst South Korea’s dramatic economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s, migrations of North Korean people during this period - albeit in very low numbers - were often cited as an indication of the capitalist regime’s superiority, particularly in the context of the Cold War (Chung, 2008).

However, with the end of the Cold War era in the early 1990s, the South Korean government no longer needed to prove its ideological superiority and gradually stopped depicting North Korean defectors as national heroes. Consequently, the Compensation Act for Heroes Who Returned was reformed yet again to the “Act to Protect North Korean Brethren Who Returned to the State” (*gwisunbughan dongpo bohobeob* in Korean), according to which North Koreans were accepted as compatriots (Choi, 2018:85). In other words, whereas previous South Korean propaganda focused on North Koreans’ social status as political defectors, the emphasis since the 1990s has shifted to issues of shared ethnicity. During the latter period, economic decline and severe food shortages pushed hundreds of thousands of North Koreans to enter China; where their lives were unstable due to their status as illegal migrants, which made them vulnerable to exploitative labor and other human rights violations, as well as the possibility of repatriation if caught by Chinese authorities. As a result, small numbers of migrants began to move from China to South Korea, where citizenship rights were granted.

Until the 1980s, fewer than 10 North Koreans moved to South Korea annually; however, the number began to increase in the early 1990s, reaching 50 a year in the mid-1990s and more than 100 in the late 1990s. In more recent years, the number of migrants has grown to reach approximately 2,000 annually. When Kim Dae-jung became the South Korean president in 1998, his government changed its view of North Koreans from political defectors to escapees who needed support for food and shelter. However, although they thereby received financial supports such as housing and social welfare services, the migrants’ overall status was reduced in comparison with previous years due both to their increasing numbers and the cessation of ideologically-based regime competition (Chung, 2008). As the number of North Korean migrants grew, South Korea’s National Assembly passed the Act on the Protection and Resettlement Support for the Residents Who Escaped from North Korea, which defined North Koreans simply as “Residents who escaped from North Korea” (*talbugmin* in Korean).

Some North Koreans who moved to South Korea founded organizations in which they identified themselves as “Escapees from North,” which became their common identity as

copied and spread by the media. However, South Korean officials defined the migrants as “residents” rather than escapees, as they considered the former to be a more accurate description of their status as settlers. A variety of self-identifications emerges as more North Koreans moved to South Korea in the 2000s. Some migrants were particularly opposed to the expression “North Korean defectors,” as they were concerned that the term could generate a negative impression of North Korea as being incapable of hosting its own people. Moreover, such a label could be interpreted as indicating that those who had left the country were ‘traitors’ (Kim, 2016). They similarly opposed their designation as “Residents Who Escaped from North Korea,” arguing that just as citizens of other countries move to other nations in search of better lives, they had moved to South Korea to seek better living environments rather than to escape the depredations of the North Korean regime (Yang, 2004).

The South Korean government accepted such views and amended the legal expression “Residents who escaped from North Korea” to “new settlers” in 2005. The government and policymakers advocated that the term would mark the beginning of a new era in which migrants would feel sheltered in South Korean society, thus in turn allowing them to advance to the next level of relations and establish peace and harmony with North Korean people. The term began to be widely used in government-led social services as well as public education; however, some migrants and other advocates objected that it did not reflect their geographical origins in North Korea (Park, 2016). As a result, the previous legal/administrative definition, Residents who escaped from North Korea, was revived in 2009 and is still used to date. Nonetheless, “North Korean escapees” remains the most widely used designation among the general public.

The above discussion introduced various terminologies - heroes, patriots, defectors, returnees, brethren, residents who escaped from North Korea - used in different legal, social and political contexts to describe North Koreans who have moved to South Korea. Below, I will discuss connotations and limitations of these terms and explain my reasons (in addition to its common usage among the general public) for choosing to refer to “North Korean escapees” in the context of this thesis.

“North Korean escapees” (*talbukja*) has been the most common expression used to refer to the migrants from the time that the number of North Koreans moving to South Korea began to increase in the 1990s until the years 2014–2016 when my fieldwork was conducted. Moreover, “those who escaped from North Korea” has been the most common self-identification amongst the organizations run for and by North Koreans in South Korea. In contrast, other individuals and organizations have preferred different terms, among the

most frequently mentioned of which is “migrants.” Many have argued that just like people from Japan, the US and other countries who have settled in South Korea, they should be regarded as migrants without explicit references to “escape” or “North Korea” (Kim, 2016).

However, North Koreans are legally and ethnically differentiated amongst other migrants in South Korea. The South Korean Constitution does not recognize North Korea as an independent state and thus North Koreans are not perceived as coming from a foreign country. In addition to this legal differentiation, because the two Koreas share a single ethnicity, North Koreans are positioned rather distinctively within South Korean society compared with other foreign nationals. For example, North Koreans as well as Chosunjok, i.e., Chinese-Koreans, are issued special visas so that they can stay and work in South Korea for a longer period of time than those from other countries. In fact, the concept of compatriots has been an important point informing the South Korean government’s migration policies. Therefore, it has been argued that referring to North Koreans as ordinary “migrants” could imply the cessation of financial supports and social welfare, as “migrants” from other countries are not entitled to similar assistance and such differentiation could lead to allegations of discrimination. Thus, such a self- and social identification could lead to a conflict of interest between North Koreans’ socio-cultural equality with and legal distinction from other foreign nationals.

Other terms have been proposed such as Hana-in and Tong-il-in, both of which denote unification of the two Koreas, as well as Buk-hyang-min, or “those who have grown up in North Korea” (Park, 2016). Each term sheds light on an aspect of North Korean people and their experiences, and thus raises corresponding pros and cons in discussions based on its potential discriminatory implications. Specific terminologies can carry political connotations, and some North Koreans argue that any such classification opens room for discrimination. They simply refuse to be objects to be classified (Ann, 2011; Hough, 2018:232).

Independent of active debates to identify suitable terminologies, North Koreans have commonly claimed to have experienced various types of discrimination due to their background rather than being fully integrated into South Korean society. Many North Koreans perceive such discrimination as being rooted in a problem of terminologies; however, such interpretations neglect that South Koreans were educated to reject communism throughout the Cold War, which engendered social hostility and hatred against North Korea and any related subjects. However, South Korean law, NGOs, and scholarly research, have largely regarded North Koreans as people who need social supports as embodied in policies (Hough, 2017). In particular, the transition of the legal terminology from the broader focus on politi-

cal refugees to the more specific reference to North Korean refugees reflects a transformation in the general view of such migrants as victims of an aberrant political ideology to those requiring social welfare. Since the mid-2000s, the dramatic increase in the number of North Koreans in South Korea has led to a shift in focus to helping them integrate into the society. In this context, North Koreans' refusal to be named or classified voices a transformation of their position from passive recipients of social welfare to active participants in the society.

Since this thesis attempts to reflect their self-identification in a range of different contexts, I have chosen the term that best describes North Koreans' self-identification, i.e., how they call themselves in their daily lives in South Korea. When I asked my interviewees which terminology identified them most accurately, most chose 'North Korean escapees.' Amongst my 45 interviewees, none chose 'migrants' - meaning those who sought for a better life; rather, they stated that they had 'escaped' in order to avoid starvation. In contrast to the concerns raised by some North Korean organizations in South Korea, they agreed that 'escape' best described their situation and did not express any negative reactions to that term. At least one respondent added that 'North Korea is a country where you cannot just leave but have to escape.' To the question of whether they thought of themselves as political refugees, they said that biological survival was their first priority and they chose South Korea as a place where citizenship was granted. All in all, the term 'North Korean escapees' appears to represent their situation as a unique and minor group in the shadow of the wider society. In other words, it reflects their marginality, their status of not fully belonging to any society.

2.4 A discussion of 'refugee' and 'economic migrant' binary

In orthodox migration theory and research, a distinction between forced and voluntary is assumed. Forced migrants are held to leave their home for political reasons, such as wars and conflicts, while voluntary migrants move to other countries for economic benefits or others (Carling, 2015; Cummings et al., 2015). In other words, the voluntary/forced distinction maps onto an assumed separation between economic and political realms. There is no categorical analytical distinction between economic migrants and political refugees due to the fact that those concepts are mixed or overlapping, to some extent. Economic crisis brings about a weak state ruling system, which may involve a violation of human rights; as a result, there are a mixture of political and economic factors that lead people to leave their homes. Therefore, academic scholars and policy makers have been cautiously discussing the scope of forced and/or voluntary, and whether there can be a clear border between the two. Whether one is a migrant or a refugee depends on the line between the opposing binaries. There are

criticisms for this dichotomy where the issue of such categorizations is raised and the main concerns can be summarized as follows.

First, the distinction between voluntary and forced migration also makes it difficult to comprehend the agency of migrants. Although the concept of agency is remained difficult to define because of its unclearness and vagueness, it is understood not only as the capacity for social actors to devise strategies and make decisions to accomplish their desires (Scott and Marshall, 2009), but as “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments - the temporal relational contexts of action - which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998:970).

However, studies on forced migration often theoretically dismiss the agency of refugees (Bakewell, 2010). For example, Richmond categorizes individuals as those with agency and those without, and forced migrants are defined as the latter since forced migrants have just ‘reacted’ to their situations to determine that they must escape from them (Richmond, 1994:59 cited in Turton, 2003:7). And yet, for example, even those in labour camps, in the most constrained circumstances, still have to take action to move out of it, which could be interpreted as ‘agency’. Turton (2003:8) notes that all migrants, whether forced or voluntary, exercise agency in migration because to migrate is to make a decision. Migrants, in other words, are deemed as ‘agents’ as albeit that their agency and mobility is constrained by their gender, class, age, networks, etc. This means that their movement is embedded in a particular social, political and historical situation. He suggests that forced migrants should be viewed as ‘purposive actors’ - as ordinary people or regular migrants who are capable of deciding to move. All migrants, either ‘forced’ or ‘unforced’, fall into the one category of ‘migrants with limited agency’ (ibid:8). The concept of agency then helps to deconstruct the distinction between voluntary and forced migration.

Second, it has been long criticized that the journey that migrants take is much more complex than the legal and institutional categories, in relation to their motives, transit places and their individual circumstances. In particular, the motivations for migration are both subjective and circumstantial. In the case of North Koreans, most of them escape from starvation but some to avoid religious persecution or for political asylum - some may have all these motives at the same time. Most North Korean escapees are a low class in the North Korean society and in the weakest position for national food distribution. Social class almost necessarily implies political and in turn economic class. The complexity of motivation for

their migration challenges the homogeneous and over-simplified voluntary/forced dyads.

Thus, scholars in migration studies argue that the concept of refugee should be extended to include individuals' actual lived experiences considering the context of movements, circumstances and motivations. The new concepts has been filling the gap of the dichotomy between voluntary economic migrants and forced migrants, 'refugees', e.g. 'externally displaced people', 'people in distress' (Goodwin-Gill 1986), 'distress migrants' (Collinson, 1999), 'vulnerable irregular migrants' (Betts, 2010). Betts also uses the term 'survival migrants' (Betts, 2013:23) defined as 'persons who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution'. However, there is criticism that it is at a premature stage to tell how expansive and inclusive these terms are to crack the solid categories on refugees and migrants (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018:51).

In order to expose the complexity of migration, the concept of the 'asylum-migration nexus' has been proposed to capture those mixed or multiple motivations for mobility (Castle, 2003:17). Zetter (2007:175) also use 'mixed migration flows' overlapping the political conflicts and economic failure. As de Haas (2009:11) argues 'the sharp distinction between forced and voluntary migration is primarily a policy and legal distinction driven by the interest of states in classifying migrants'. The different status of North Koreans in many destinations provides a good illustration of the changeable legal positions of migrants. In China, a popular transit country where about 80% of North Korean escapees live, the government has labelled them as illegal economic migrants for contradictory diplomatic reasons. However, in Europe and North America, North Korean escapees have settled down as refugees or asylum-seekers (Chan and Schloenhardt, 2007). Therefore, whether one is deemed to be a smuggled migrant, who has voluntarily chosen to illegally cross the border, or a refugee, who has been forced to move, rests in part on the foreign policies and immigration regimes of the receiving countries. Despite the Refugee Convention, the status is subject to the interests and priorities of the receiving countries which shows that the legal categorization of status is in fact politically constructed (Allen et al., 2018; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). Also, such categorization is not objective nor fixed, but of "subjective perceptions of how people fit into different spaces in the social order and of the terms on which society should engage with them in varying contexts and at different points in time" (Moncrieffe, 2007:1).

As we have discussed so far, though the idea of a clean boundary between voluntary and forced migration has been criticized by many scholars (Anderson, 2013; Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2009; Turton, 2003), as has the dominant discourse on smuggling and trafficking that rests on the assumed binary of voluntary/forced (Anderson, 2013; Anderson and O'Connell

Davidson, 2003; O’Connell Davidson, 2015), such critiques have not, to date, been brought to bear on questions about North Korean migration to South Korea. This thesis addresses that gap in the existing literature. Also, by capturing the complexity of their migratory process and experience, the empirical data will show that the concepts of refugee and economic migration based on the forced/voluntary binary are constructed rather than intrinsic.

2.5 *Conceptualising NKE’s movement - the limits of international frameworks*

As it is discussed in the previous session, migration literature has generally drawn a distinction between ‘forced migrants’, such as refugees and asylum seekers who leave their countries to escape from political persecution or conflict, and ‘voluntary migrants’ who move primarily for economic benefits (Castles and Miller, 2009:188). In general, a range of types of forced migration have been recognized in migration studies (Castles, 2003:14-5). First, victims of war (UNHCR, 1995), and second, refugees who have been displaced by development projects, such as airports and dams. Third, there are displaced persons - those who were forced to escape from natural disasters and industrial accidents. Another form of forced migration discussed in the migration literature involves people who are trafficked for the purposes of exploitation across international borders. In the dominant discourse on human trafficking, it is widely asserted that most victims of trafficking are women and children, who are trafficked for the sex industry all over the world. Three-quarters of North Korean escapees are women and they are commonly represented as victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (Kim et al, 2009). North Korean escapees are therefore widely understood to be ‘forced migrants’ in the sense they have been driven to escape from repressive political situations, and/or severe food shortages due to prolonged droughts, and/or because they are trafficked into sexual slavery.

North Koreans’ irregular migration has therefore been conceptualised as forced migration in academic scholarship, migration policy and international human right laws, and North Korean exiles are understood to be refugees, asylum seekers and victims of trafficking. North Koreans fleeing to other countries are recognised as ‘refugees’ who need legal protection in international law (Kim M, 2010; Lankov, 2004). In addition to refugee entitlement, North Korea escapees have been viewed as asylum seekers in search of protection under the laws from destination countries. Over the past decade, a growing number of North Korean escapees have attempted to claim asylum in a range of developed countries, such as the United

Kingdom, the United States and Canada (Wolman, 2013). As famine and political repression were motives for North Koreans to escape, they were recognized as refugees. According to the interviews of those who escaped North Korea from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s when North Korea's economic failures had a significant impact on everyday life, their escape was primarily for the search for food (Good Friends, 2004). Other research and reports in the early and mid-2000s found that hunger was just one motive and some North Koreans crossed to China for better environments for life (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Lee, 2006).

Studies during the late 2000s and 2010s, on the other hand, show that chronic malnutrition and economic opportunities were also the motives for escape. A survey of 1,346 North Koreans living in China in 2008 showed that 95% of them went to China for search for food while only 2% referred to political repression as the reason for their escape (Chang et al, 2008). The interviews in 2017 with North Korean escapees who have come to South Korea since 2010 had significantly higher responses for economic benefits (Do et al. 2017). In a narrow sense, these reactions of North Korean escapees seem to support the Chinese government's claim of them as 'economic migrants' rather than refugees fleeing from political prosecution. And yet, food shortages and economic desperation in North Korea is tied to the political order, and it is the marginalized and persecuted class known as *sungbun* that suffers most. Therefore, North Korean escapees cannot be defined only as political refugees or only as economic migrants. The situation of North Korean escapees highlights problems with the distinction between forced and voluntary migration. It also draws attention to problems with the smuggling/trafficking dyad that informs migration policy and international human rights law and policy.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In this thesis, I present the results of fieldwork conducted over thirteen months in three waves: June-September 2014, February-September 2015, and May-June 2016, exploring North Koreans' experiences of their migration to South Korea through smuggling and brokerage networks. Here, I describe the research methods used to gather data and the processes of accessing research participants. After describing the research design, I discuss the sampling, data analysis, and methodological issues involved in the development of this research and the key ethical issues arising.

3.1 Research design

The main aim of this research is to explore the characteristics of North Koreans' migration through smuggling networks as well as to describe their experiences of movement. The theme of North Koreans' migration has received little empirical attention in sociology and migration studies. This thesis responds to the necessity for empirical research on North Koreans' border-crossing.

Qualitative methods are generally employed where the aim is to understand participants' experiences, activities, and perceptions by collecting data from participant's observation, in-depth interviews, and analysing documents. Qualitative methods provide outstanding opportunities to gather present, reliable, exhaustive and explicit data to answer the related questions on research topic (Hammersley, 2006). Some researchers have argued that qualitative methods allow a researcher to understand the complexity of relationships with many different actors and their perspectives and behaviour (Suryani, 2008). Applying participant observation together with in-depth interviews and document analysis can produce more extended understanding of complex experiences. This is because the researchers can be knowledgeable of relevant social-cultural contexts (Flick, 2002).

Therefore, a qualitative, multi-method design has been chosen for this study. Dezin and Lincoln (2005) note that using various types of qualitative research for one study is likely to generate a resolution to more complex research questions while also providing strong evi-

dence. By triangulating different methods, the research performed herein is likely to produce a more insightful and valid account of North Korean migratory experience. Three different qualitative methods were employed for this research: 1) Semi-structured and repeated interviews with North Korean escapees and those involved in their smuggling networks; brokers, missionaries, pastors, activists from NGOs, policy makers, and government officers 2) participant observation of how smuggling networks are arranged for North Koreans' migratory process while participating in NGO activities 3) documentary analysis of relevant documents published by media, NGOs and governments. This design has been based on criteria such as adequacy, appropriateness and obtainability, as suggested by Bryman (2001). In the following sections, I describe the methods used for gathering my data, with the actual research process in more details, and the ethical considerations emerging in this study.

3.2 The interviewees

The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted for this research over the three intervals between June - September 2014, February-September 2015, and May-June 2016 in Seoul, South Korea. Data was collected in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, for three reasons. First, South Korea is the country in which the largest number of North Koreans - currently estimated to be around 30,000 - live outside of North Korea. Besides the attractions of shared language and cultural familiarity, since South Korea almost automatically issues citizenship to North Koreans, most North Korean escapees move to and live in South Korea for the purpose of permanent settlement. Seoul was chosen to be the location of the fieldwork as it has the largest population of North Korean escapees, providing many opportunities to engage with them. Second, most religious and secular international and national non-governmental organizations (INGOs and NGOs) focus on North Korean escapees in Seoul, and also the majority of groups/organizations that assist North Koreans in settling in to South Korea, (namely South Korean governmental institutions, the Ministry of Unification and the North Korean Refugee Foundation and so on) are located in Seoul. These organizations, government agencies and NGOs help North Koreans escape from North Korea and travel to South Korea via China and third countries such as Russia, Mongolia, and Southeast Asian countries. In order to gain an access to information on how North Koreans travel to South Korea, the help and cooperation of these organizations were sought. Seoul was also the best location to conduct interviews with activists in such institutions and organizations. Fieldwork in North Korea and China were not conducted for the safety of both the researcher and the interviewees. This will be described in more detail later, but in brief: The researcher is South

Korean and South Korean citizens are also legally forbidden to travel to North Korea. South Koreans in China engaging with North Korean escapees are easily suspected of providing illegal assistance. Some South Korean NGO activists caught helping North Korean escapees move out of China and have been consequently imprisoned for several months and fined. Furthermore, North Korean escapees are reluctant to provide interviews in China as their identity and illegal status may be exposed.

The first round of fieldwork was conducted in June - September 2014. During this four-month period, I searched for an organization to join by participating in the events and meetings arranged by NGOs founded by North Korean escapees. I also visited the North Korean societies at various universities, churches and religious organizations for North Korean escapees and shelters run by them, and housing facilities operated by NGOs to find suitable locations for participant observation and interviews. During this period, I was able to meet with many diverse North Korean escapees, NGO activists who helped North Korean escapees to the South, government officials and religious groups. After initial exploration and visits in June, from July onwards I narrowed the scope to those who are involved in activities that help North Koreans' movement. I attended social meetings of these organisations on a regular basis.

From February to September 2015, I embarked on participant observation and interviews with networks built in the first round of fieldwork. During this period, I was involved in three different organizations where I was able to build rapport with North Korean escapees and others involved in their movement. These became my interviewees.

The first organization in which I worked part-time for 6 months was an NGO comprising a group of North Korean escapees who support North Korean escapees in China and help them move to South Korea. They also campaign for public awareness of human rights violations against North Korean escapees in China and provide counseling services and welfare facilities in South Korea. My job was to help North Korean escapees with their daily life such as banking, computer work, official paperwork which they need to obtain the government subsidy, and to organize welfare events hosted by this group. For example, on hangawi day a major harvest festival in Korea, they would gather North Korean escapees for an evening out together. I was also involved in intermediary liaison for connecting Chinese smugglers to South Korean brokers to support North Korean escapees in China.

The second organization which I joined was one of the churches that brought North Korean escapees to South Korea and helped them settle in the society. Its pastors, missionaries and members were of diverse ethnic backgrounds including South Koreans, Americans, North

Koreans, Chinese and Chinese Korean. I went to church every week to translate between Americans and North Koreans. Most pastors and missionaries were involved in smuggling and/or brokerage in China or brokerage in South Korea. A large portion of members were North Korean escapees who moved to South Korea with their aid and those who still needed help/guidance for settlement. This church also ran a shelter where North Korean escapees with economic difficulties could stay and I was able to build rapport with them while helping their cooking and cleaning.

I was also involved in the North Korean societies at two universities in Seoul. I joined the book group in one society and participated in a volunteer group helping North Korean elderly and disabled in the other, both on a weekly basis.

Through the NGO, church and two university societies, I was able to observe potential participants, build rapport with them and gained a general understanding of their backgrounds. In the first two months, five pilot interviews were conducted, two males and three females, with a wide range of backgrounds such as sex, age, times of departure from China and arrival in South Korea, duration of stay in China and escape routes and so on. Further research participants were collected through their network.

The sample used in this research has thus been gathered through a snowball sample method, which is the most commonly used method when conducting qualitative research. Snowball sampling is defined as a strategy to collect research participants through identifying an initial subject who then introduces the names of other actors. These actors can, in turn, expand the network of research participants by contacting potential participants themselves (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). The primary strength of this method is its ability to overcome access problems related to hidden populations - such as the criminal and socially isolated populations (Atkinson et al., 2001). Using a snowball sample method for this study is justified by the nature of the topic that is being researched, and the situations in which the data was collected.

Since the Korean War in which North Korea attacked South Korea, the older South Korea generation with direct experience of war have been hostile to the North Koreans. This sociocultural atmosphere against them has been gradually established which has affected even younger generations who often put forward an argument that the North Korean escapees are unwanted migrants and the citizenships and social welfare for them causes an unnecessary burden for the national budget. As a result, North Korean escapees are reluctant to openly reveal their identity in South Korea. Especially, the North Korean women are often depicted by media to be involved in trafficking and/or the sex industry in, the social stigma

of prostitution making them hesitant to reveal their identities. While they are an important source of North Koreans' movement, they may be considered a hidden population and thus snowball sampling was chosen to reach them.

However, one of the limitations to the snowball sampling is that, if the data are collected through a particular network of people, it reduces the generality of research owing to the similarities of their experiences (Alice Bloch, 1999:372). Kim et al.'s (2009) research on North Korean victims of human trafficking, for example, used the snowball sampling where most participants were recruited from a single NGO. Since the participants stayed in the same place, they may have shared their experiences and recollections with each other, generating a possibility that their narratives may thus be (re)stated in a similar fashion.

Therefore, in order to overcome the methodological shortcomings of snowballing, I tried to broaden the network as much as possible by collecting research participants through gatekeepers in three different sectors (NGOs, churches and university societies). There are a total of 60 interviewees, of whom 45 were North Korean escapees, 15 were NGO activists, South Korean brokers, American pastors and missionaries, Chinese missionaries and Korean-Chinese pastors. Non-escapees were interviewed for additional information for and accounts of how escapees moved.

Table 3.1 and 3.2 below provide the characteristics of the North Korean research participants, i.e. the interviewees. As shown, the respondents fall into one or more of the following four categories: (1) those who escaped from North Korea and settled in South Korea through China and third countries, e.g. Mongolia, Russia or other Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Cambodia ; (2) those who lived as irregular migrants in China and, for women, sub-categories are whether they were involved in marriage/cohabitation with a Chinese man, sex-worker and/or other temporary jobs; (3) those who escaped again from North Korea after repatriation in China ; (4) those who worked as smugglers/brokers in North Korea or China, or brokers in South Korea.

Among the 45 North Korean interviewees, there were 30 female and 15 male participants, reflecting the fact that North Koreans' migration to South Korea is highly gendered. According to official statistics, in 2017 there were 30,805 North Korean escapees in South Korea amongst whom 21,914 were women and 8,891 were men. This gender ratio of approximately 70:30 is reflected in the in the selection of my interviewees. The majority of the participants are of relatively low socio-economic classes and come from the region of Hamgyungbukdo which shares a border with China. They were aged between 23 and 75 at the time of the interview and, while the age distribution is fairly uniform, it moderately peaks in the group

of those who were in their forties. Most of them went through China except for three male escapees, Chul-ho, Sang-chul and Jun-ho, who came to South Korea via Russia. Those who moved to South Korea via China have a wide range of duration of stay in China -from a week to 15 years. Women tend to stay longer in China as they are usually involved in a relationship with a Chinese man.

As shown in the tables below, the time of departure from North Korea shows a wide range amongst interviewees, between 1998 and 2014, while most of their final movement to South Korea took place in a comparatively compact period between mid-2000s and 2011. This coincides with the reduction of border surveillance, increasing possibility of settlement in South Korea, and the development of smuggling and brokerage networks, as elaborated in Chapter 1. Since 2011, however, border surveillance has been reinforced by the new chairman Kim Jong-un and quite a lot of smugglers and NGOs have been caught and punished. The number of North Korean escapees moving to South Korea was around 2,000 per year between 2005 and 2010, it has nearly halved since 2011 and has not recovered (SKMU, 2017). It is therefore a reasonable assumption that to a large extent the distribution of my interviewees reflects the wider population of North Korean escapees.

On the other hand, the absence of escapees who moved to South Korea since 2015 remains a limitation of this sample. When North Korean escapees arrive in South Korea, they are taken to the national security agency to be investigated whether they are spies or involved in security agency in North Korea. While the period of investigation varies from case to case, it usually lasts between a week and 3 months after which the escapees join the camp for about 3 months in order to learn about life in South Korea. During this period, they are not allowed to contact anyone outside the camp, especially South Koreans. It means that it takes at least a few months for them to meet with ordinary citizens of South Korea. For this reason, at the time of my fieldwork, access to the then recent escapees was not available. Instead, I have tried to adopt documentary analysis in order to reflect up-to-date information about North Korea.

3.3 The interviews

Semi-structured, in-depth and repeated interviews were conducted with forty-five North Korean migrants living in South Korea to interpret their situation directly in their own voice. In addition, semi-structured interviews with fifteen others - notably, NGO activists, pastors, missionaries and brokers who were involved in aiding the escapees' migration - were carried out to gain a deeper understanding of their movement.

Semi-structured interviews are where structured question guide forms are used. This method provides the researcher with an opportunity to investigate and clarify important issues of research topics (Babbi, 2007). Also, it is considered to be the most efficient and appropriate method to provide flexibility to the interviewees when answering similar questions in various settings (Bryman, 2001). Use of a repeat interview was also made to enhance this flexibility. Repeat interviewing has been used mainly to study sensitive topics or issues related to crime as most victims go through suffering from traumatic experiences for a considerable period of time after being convicted, it is hard to fully contain their painful experiences in a single interview (La Rooy, et al., 2008).

Most of my interviewees had traumatic experiences in North Korea such as extreme hunger, torture, imprisonment, rape and disability. While it will be discussed in more detail in the next section on ethics, the majority of my interviewees were hesitant in sharing their suffering from the first-round traumatic experiences and put forward only a description at a superficial level. Establishing rapport and trust with the interviewees was sometimes possible in the first or second meeting, but and took as long as 2 years in others. It was also important to wait until they want to tell about their sensitive issues/experiences. It subsequently led to three periods of fieldwork. The first period from June to September 2014 was to sample and build rapport with potential participants and conduct pilot interviews. The second period from February to September in 2015 was to focus on semi-structured interviews. The final period from May to July in 2016 was to fill in the gaps for those who were unavailable or hesitant in the first two rounds of the interviews. While I was not in South Korea, I kept up communication with participants on social media networks. Marking special occasions such as Chinese New Year's Day, hangawi Day and Christmas increased the intimacy with the participants. Through repeated interviews, the participants were able to recall experiences and memories not initially mentioned, and the confidence level in their narratives increased.

Few interviewees were still willing to speak of their painful experiences from the first interview. They had a desire to tell the suffering which they experienced. A single question might provoke several different responses - one motivation for conducting repeated interviews even for those who aided the escapees' movement, i.e. NGO activists, pastors and missionaries and so on, to cross check facts. Not every participant was available for repeated interviews however. Some did not wish to have another interview after the first one and some fully answered all the questions in the first interview and there was no need for the second. Of a total of 60 interviewees, one-off interviews were conducted with 7 participants, two interviews with 16 participants, three interviews with 19 participants, four interviews with

9 participants, five interviews with 7 participants and six interviews with 2 participants.

Interviews typically lasted between one and a half to two hours. The variations in duration are related to how fast/slow and directly/indirectly the participants responded to the questions. Pauses, sobbing and emotional outbursts when describing painful experiences also affected the overall progression. A background information sheet providing demographic information was completed for each interviewee at the end of the interview so that I had a structured data set recoding the background characteristics of my interviewees.

In sum, a total of 185 interviews were conducted with North Korean escapees and those who helped their movements. All the interviews were conducted in Korean - the native language of most of the research participants as well as the researcher. The American pastor and the Chinese missionaries were also fluent in Korean, so although it may not be as good as their mother tongue, there was no problem with communication except for one occasion where some help was sought from an interpreter for better understanding during the interview.

Every interview was conducted one-on-one, except one occasion where the interpreter was needed, for the protection of the interviewees' privacy, and to increase the reliability of this research. Interviews were recorded with the approval of the interviewee. However, when this request was denied in few cases, notes were taken instead to record what was said after the interview. The very first meeting with any interviewee would take place in locations where they would feel familiar and comfortable. For those met through NGO networks, the interviews would take place on a one-on-one basis in a small consultation room in the NGO office where they would also discuss issues in their life with professional/non-professional consultants. For those who were recruited through church networks, the interviews were conducted in shelters run by the church or in a place close to their accommodation. For those recruited through university societies, the interviews took place in university common rooms. These locations were places where I also met with participants in the course of ordinary activities, so they were convenient and comfortable places for both parties. As rapport and trust built up, repeat interviews would take place in their house or accommodation and it was notable that the participants intended to share intimacy with the researcher by offering lunch or tea before or after the interviews. In addition, in order to more effectively convey their experiences and suffering, they would show the pictures of their family in North Korea and/or the belongings they had kept since the moment of departure from North Korea. The total duration of the 185 interviews expands over 280 hours, the transcript for an hour of interview takes 6-8 pages in Korean and the whole transcript is approximately 1,960 pages

in volume.

Table 3.3 provides the information for the interviews with fifteen others - South Korean NGO activists, South Korean brokers, American pastors and missionaries, Korean-Chinese missionaries, Chinese missionaries and Korean-Chinese pastors - who helped escapees' migration at various stages.

3.4 *Additional forms of data collection*

Since the main focus of the thesis is to reveal North Korean escapees' narratives in their own voices as much as possible, the main task has been to collect the data through the interviews. Also, while working for the NGO, there were opportunities to observe how smuggling and brokerage networks are arranged for North Koreans' migratory processes. At church, while translating between American pastors/missionaries and North Korean escapees, an understanding of how they engaged during the latter's movements was gained. Besides the interviews, I spent a lot of time with North Korean escapees, leading to informal conversations with them as well as participant observation. While they were aware that I was a researcher writing about their experience of movement and life in South Korea, they showed more interest in the fact that I was studying abroad in the UK. Engaging in interviews with a highly educated researcher who was brought up in Seoul appeared to be another attractive feature for them and some showed a pride in doing so.

In Seoul, North Korean escapees tend to gather together and form small communities or networks, centring around locations in which the escapees live in flats provided by the South Korean government where the housing prices are comparatively low. Discrimination towards North Korean discourages active engagements with ordinary South Korean citizens in daily life. However, being associated with a researcher and participating in the interviews seemed to be somewhat of a South Korean friend-making to them and in our informal conversations they often brought up issues that they came across in their life, seeking my help in things which ordinary South Korean citizens would relatively easily deal with. For example, if they thought that they were treated unfairly for being North Koreans, they asked me to accompany them as a guardian. Also, in places such as beauty shops, banks, department stores and hospitals and so on where they wanted to be treated like ordinary South Korean citizens, they would ask for my company. There was also an occasion where both mother and daughter escaped from North Korea and the daughter was being bullied at school for her identity. She was involved in a fight for which a committee meeting was to be held. Her mother asked for my presence in the meeting so that the procedures would not be

Tab. 3.1: Profiles of North Korean female escapees

#	Pseudonym	Age (as of 2016)	Year of border -crossing to China	Duration of being in China (years)	Married in China	Duration of stay in concentration camps in North Korea (years)	Escaping Route	Year of Arrival in South Korea
1	Mi-Jung	45	2004	4	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2008
2	Sunbok	37	2000	10	Y	3	China & Southeast Asia	2011
3	Ji-sun	35	2000	7	Y	1	China & Mongolia	2007
4	Yunjeong	47	2005	5	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2013
5	Hwan	27	2010	1	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2014
6	Hwasun	40	2002	5	Y	1 & 1/2	China & Southeast Asia	2009
7	Jin-suk	45	2004	4	Y	3	China & Southeast Asia	2010
8	Sunjeong	43	2006	6	Y	2	China & Southeast Asia	2013
9	Jeongyun	47	2001	8	Y	2	China & Southeast Asia	2012
10	Hee-sun	50	1999	7	Y	N	China & Mongolia	2006
11	Miseon	42	2004	5	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2011
12	Mira	47	2002	3	Y	3	China & Southeast Asia	2009
13	Mijin	28	2009	2	Y	3 months	China & Southeast Asia	2013
14	Yun	45	2004	8	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2013
15	Chang-ran	55	1998	1	N	15	China & Southeast Asia	2014
16	Kyung-sin	34	2001	8	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2010
17	Su-yeon	39	2006	1/2	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2008
18	In-suk	33	2008	2	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2012
19	Kyung-suk	51	2000	8	Y	3	China & Southeast Asia	2013
20	Jeong-suk	43	2006	3	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2010
21	Young-hee	75	2011	3 days	N	N	China (Jikhaeng/direct line)	2011
22	Yun-jeong	47	2003	8	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2014
23	Suk-hee	48	2007	5	Y	6 months	China & Southeast Asia	2013
24	Sung-ran	45	2003	6	Y	1	China & Southeast Asia	2009
25	Hye-ja	68	2010	1 week	N	N	China (Jikhaeng/direct line)	2010
26	Ryeonju	60	1998	2	N	15	China & Southeast Asia	2014
27	Yeonsuk	50	2002	1	Y	5	China & Southeast Asia	2009
28	Sunok	60	2010	1	N	3 months	China & Southeast Asia	2011
29	Kyung-soon	38	2008	5	Y	N	China & Southeast Asia	2013
30	Jang-hee	52	2006	8	Y	N	China & Southeast Asia	2009

Tab. 3.2: Profiles of North Korean male escapees

#	Pseudonym	Age (as of 2016)	Year of border-crossing to China or Russia (duration)	Duration of camp (years)	Escaping route	Year of Arrival in South Korea
1	Chul-soo	47	2014 China	1	China & Southeast Asia	2014
2	Jeongseok	49	2010 China	1	China & Southeast Asia	2010
3	Hak-cheol	45	2007 China	1	China & Southeast Asia	2008
4	Hee-cheol	36	2008 China	1/2	China & Southeast Asia	2011
5	Chul-jim	72	2010 China	N	China (Jikhaeng/direct line)	2010
6	Hak-dong	45	2004 China	1	China & Southeast Asia	2006
7	Jung-su	32	2011 China	5	China & Southeast Asia	2012
8	Cheol-jin	22	2012 China	1 month	China & Southeast Asia	2013
9	Jeong-ho	35	2008 China	1 & 1/2	China & Southeast Asia	2009
10	Ging-ba	70	2014 (5 days)	N	China (Jikhaeng/direct line)	2014
11	Chul-ho	55	2000 (13 yrs)	N	Russia	2014
12	Sang-chul	47	2002 (10 yrs)	N	Russia	2013
13	Jun-ho	60	2001 (11 yrs)	N	Russia	2012
14	Chul-min	21	2012 (2 yrs)	3 months	China & Southeast Asia	2014
15	Kyung-soo	35	2011 (2 yrs)	2	China & Southeast Asia	2013

Tab. 3.3: Profiles of actors involved in smuggling network

#	Pseudonym	Sex	Age (as of 2016)	Nationality
1	Eun-kyung	F	52	South Korean
2	Jee-hee	F	43	South Korean
3	Dong-woo	M	35	South Korean
4	Hyun-moo	M	38	South Korean
5	Chu	F	60	Korean-Chinese
6	Bill	M	55	American
7	Pyung-rho	M	52	South Korean
8	Liye	F	53	Korean-Chinese
9	Susan	F	49	American
10	Bo-young	F	32	South Korean
11	Weibin	M	35	Chinese
12	Chao	F	40	Korean-Chinese
13	Fei	M	48	Korean-Chinese
14	Tae-woo	M	35	South Korean
15	Chul-lee	M	42	South Korean

biased by their backgrounds. On another occasion, one of the interviewees encountered sexual harassment at work and asked for my help to file an official complaint with the police. Such requests were routinely encountered in attending Sunday services, meetings and other events organized by church, for example. In particular, there was a higher demand for help from new arrivals from North Korea, in matters such as opening bank accounts and/or dealing with bureaucratic work at public offices.

Throughout the fieldwork, I did not attempt to conceal my identity and openly introduced myself as a researcher living and studying in the United Kingdom. My knowledge and experiences of the UK appeared to be an attractive feature especially to those who wished to migrate to the UK or Europe. They often mistakenly regarded me as a broker who could potentially help their migration, e.g. applying for refugee status in the UK, despite my lack of relevant information. Some women asked for matchmaking with English men so that they could acquire UK permanent residency through marriage. Whilst I was clear with participants that I was unable to help with these matters, all these formal and informal engagements were the seeds for further interactions and allowed to develop a close and abiding relationship with them (Kook, 2018:117).

I also employ documentary analysis to establish relevant background knowledge on the North Korean migration processes through China to South Korea. This form of research is particularly helpful for literature reviews and investigating a topic's historical background, and it requires analytic reading and review of a range of written texts. It was also beneficial for the researcher to be able to highlight research found during the document analysis in order to validate the researcher's own research aims (Scott, 1990). In order to explore the wide range of contexts related to the current research a range of documentary sources have been consulted, including books, academic research, newspapers, media report, journals, national documents published in North Korea, China, and South Korea, working papers, reports, and leaflets from NGOs such as the International Crisis Group, the Human Rights Watch and Liberty in North Korea (LINK).

3.5 *Data analysis*

In this research, thematic analysis was performed in six phases of analysis, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006:36): 1) familiarizing oneself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing the themes, 5) defining and naming the themes, and 6) producing the report. In accordance with this, during the first step of this I transcribed all interviews performed in Korean after the recorded interviews are completed. After tran-

scribing this data in Korean and then into English where relevant for the current research, I read and re-read it in order to become familiarized with it. During the second phase, I generated initial codes by coding the collected data based on Emerson et al.'s (1995:146) list of questions, which are considered one of most appropriate for qualitative research (Bryman, 2001):

- What are people doing?
- What are they trying to accomplish?
- How, exactly, do they do this? What specific means and/or strategies do they use?
- How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on?
- What assumptions are they making?
- What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes?
- Why did I include them?

Thirdly, I arranged the codes into potential themes and collect all data related to each individual theme following as:

- What are North Koreans' experiences of their movement? (Why and how did North Koreans move?)
- How does gender affect migrants' ability to travel; their experience of routes and the relationship that have surrounded their movement?
- How do smuggling networks arrange North Koreans' migration? Who is involved in the networks? What are their motivations and interests?
- How did North Koreans themselves consider their movement?

Next, during the process of reviewing the themes, I checked whether the themes work well with the coded extracts as well as the data set as a whole. By doing so, a thematic map of analysis was produced. During phase five, each theme was defined and named by analysing each theme in detail and all themes as a whole. In the sixth and final phase, the selected extracts were analysed in relation to the questions of the current research and literature review, which concluded the analysis of all data collected for this research.

3.6 Ethics

Ethical issues exist in any sort of research. A consideration of ethics needs to be a critical part throughout research process. Consequentialist ethics suggest that ethical decisions ought to be based on the consequences of researchers' actions, considering the following question: Does the research cause harm to the participant? (Bryman, 2001). My research on North Koreans' migration takes into account the consequentialist ethical approach. The process of my research generates tension between doing good and harm for research participants. And yet, the risks for participants in my research can be prevented or reduced through appropriate ethical principles. In this section, I begin with discussing risks of harming North Korean escapees, their family and/or future escapees by making them identifiable, or identifying routes etc. Risk of re-traumatizing victims of torture is also addressed in the next section. Finally, I will explore the duty to bear witness - the fact that people wanted their difficult stories told.

3.6.1 Risks of harming North Korean escapees

The privacy of research participants is protected by anonymity. Those studied are less likely to be harmed by information on them appearing in the public area if they are unable to be identified. Pseudonyms and disguised research sites have long been used in published materials (Lee, 1992). Israel and Iain (2006:24-5) have provided methodological precautions in order to keep confidential the identities of the researched and their activities in two stages: first, at the earliest possible stage, researchers remove all names and identifiable features or do not record names and other data at all. Second, in the writing up stage, personal details such as names, places and other linguistic characters can be removed or disguised. It is also argued that these precautions help to protect data from theft or unintentional exposure.

As Israel and Iain suggest, identities of participants in my research have been confidential in both research process and result by anonymizing names and any information from which identities could be inferred, for example locations and places in my research. I am also mindful of deciding whether or not sensitive information was recorded. In my research practice, I did not label tape recordings of interviews but rely on being able to identify respondents by their voices. Tapes were erased immediately after transcription, and only pseudonyms are used in field notes. The master-list which linked real names to pseudonyms was destroyed once the material was written up. I then altered or removed information which could make the participants recognizable. Such anonymization and selectivity in recoding have lead those

studied to be more willing to tell their sensitive stories.

Confidentiality of identities of North Korean participants is one of most indispensable obligations in my research ethics due to their ‘illicit’ activities. Crossing the border without government permission is illegal in North Korea, as this research has discussed from its first chapter. In addition, the North Korean migration process is by nature highly secretive, since the exposure of migration routes would remove the possibility of potential North Korean escapees to leave via those routes due to a significant increase of surveillance there and at the borderline. Under the duty of confidentiality, therefore, this research sought not to harm individual research participants or their relatives by protecting the identities of the research participants. However, all the concerns about confidentiality are not covered by anonymisation of data. It needs to be remembered that the anonymisation of individuals does not mean that they cannot be identified by others.

Accidental disclosure can occur in various ways. Rose Wiles (2013, 46-7) has discussed the situations in which confidentiality is accidentally breached. To begin with, when research is presented in forums or other conferences, research participant can be sometimes recognised from visual clues by providing enough information about anonymised locations.

Visual data, particularly photographs that the researchers have taken in the context of the research present particular challenges for anonymity. Much of this type of visual material, such as films or video featuring research sites also makes the anonymisation of individuals or locations problematic (Clark and Prosser, 2011). In this regard, I anonymise geographical information including research sites when I give presentations about my research in forums or conferences. Pseudonyms were applied during the writing up stage to the locations where North Korean fugitives took refuge or hid. Further, I do not use photographs or videos which enable individuals attending forums to identify participants, their activities and research sites.

It however does not mean that I do not use any visual material in my research. A range of images and video involving North Koreans’ Underground Railroad have become a publicly available information. For example, it is possible to access visual materials published by international organisations such as the UN and UNHCR from the internet. Some images related to North Korean movement have been also published in reports from governments of several countries. For example, the South Korean government has annually published the White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea since 1998 in order to raise public awareness for the issues of North Koreans’ human rights in South Korea. The US Department of State has also published some materials such as the trafficking in persons report regarding North

Koreans' movement to China. I used the visual material from existing publications such materials from international NGOs or books written about North Korea.

Moreover, research involving a small number of organisations or groups may often pose difficulties in regard to confidentiality. These issues of internal confidentiality also occur in studying research participants from families or friendship networks (Iphofen, 2009). Professional brokers, NGOs and missionaries conducting North Koreans' Underground Railroads are connected with each other by sharing information on routes or hiding. North Korean fugitives who choose to be anonymous also use their families or friendship networks for escaping. It is possible when I gather research interviewees, I may choose those who have been acquainted with each other. In my research, it is necessary perform private interviews to ensure that internal confidentiality is maintained in a range of ways that do not jeopardise individuals' well-being and their relationships with others.

It is most important to address the issues of accidental disclosure in relation to publications. Research publications can be read by a range of audiences: participants in research, ordinary people interested in that topic, funders, publishers, other social scientists and the wider society. As discussed before, disguise and pseudonyms are often used in order to keep confidential in the identifications of those studies in sociological writing (Israel and Iain, 2006:26).

Anonymization, however, can be challenging. Confidentiality of individuals can often be easily breached by the inclusion of contextual information in qualitative research particularly. This is because the identities of those studied can often be deduced from descriptions of individuals who have distinct roles such as a principle of a school, representatives of NGOs, their networks with others, and even, simply, from the overall 'texture' of information or data. In addition, describing places, general locations, organisations, events, people or some factual information on it maybe often bring about a sufficient accumulation of incidental detail to lead to deductive disclosure (Lee, 1992:185).

Due to these risks, it has even been suggested that some research result is not published at all - in other words, exercising self-censorship. Some scholars who have studied the Underground Railroad have not published sensitive information in order to avoid any potential risk of disclosure. For example, Frederick Douglass (1994), a leading writer and escaped slave in the 19th century, mentioned the risk of publishing the routes which were used by slaves escaping in his seminal autobiography. He pointed out that once the routes were known to the public, any underground shelters and secret networks through those routes could not be used anymore. Many researchers involved in partial self-sensorship by choosing deliberately

to omit specific items of sensitive information from their published work. Such intentional omission is generally used not only to avoid disclosure of research participants' identities to protect them (Israel and Iain, 2006). In Kim et al.'s (2009) study of North Korean trafficked women in China, the authors omit some specific information on their research such as events, groups, organizations, factual information and locations, which may enable the participants to be identified. Although the confidentiality is maintained in their research, it still remains that omitting too many details runs the risk of not describing the participants' situation fruitfully. If Kim et al.(2009) relied not only on omission but also disguise and pseudonyms in balance, the experiences of North Korean women in China could be described richly and thickly.

However, many publications on North Koreans' Underground Railroad have some information on North Korean fugitives and their secret route for escaping process. Writers, such as North Korean escapees, Christian missionaries, journalists, NGOs, and media, have omitted certain information and anonymized names, organizations, research sites, and locations. Specifically, the North Korean escapees Kang et al. (2007) wrote about their own experiences of living in and escaping from their home based. Kim (2008) is a Christian missionary who has assisted North Koreans' moves to South Korea. He also wrote about the route and secret churches used by North Korean escapees. He did not omit the names but they were anonymized. Several journalists disclosed the escaping routes and underground shelters in their books, even explicitly stating actual names of locations (Demick, 2010; Harden, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2014). Moreover, the International Crisis group (2006), Muico (2005), Human Right Watch (2002, 2013), and Liberty in North Korea (2013) published the reports about the routes that North Koreans travelled along for fleeing from their home by showing visual material.

Reflecting on this trend of research on North Korean escapees, since the dilemma of publishing information on escape routes cannot be emphasized enough, I applied anonymization and omission to the specific items of sensitive information on North Korean migration, which even potentially lead the participants and locations to be identifiable. Before making this data public, it should also be investigated whether there might be a danger of alerting North Korean authorities. Therefore, this research did not harm to the individual research participants or their relatives by protecting the identities of the research participants.

3.6.2 Risk of retraumatizing victims of torture

There is the potential that participants in my research might be vulnerable to psychological distress and re-traumatizing. The interview questions involve a range of sensitive topics such as being arrested, starvation, being trafficked, rapes, tortures, abuse, and violence which some of them may experience during their escape and repatriation to North Korea. During the interview, they may become distressed or re-traumatized by insensitive questions, or from having to recall painful and traumatic experiences.

I adopted several strategies for risk minimization. First, I interviewed many participants accessed through NGOs because NGOs have the experience and professional support mechanisms to assist me in study. I also monitored the participants during the interview. When they became distressed, I terminated the interview and referred participants to counselling services of the NGO. Second, I had worked as a counsellor, fully qualified by Ministry of Gender Equality in South Korea, for the victims of domestic and sexual violence during around one year in Korean Women's Hotline. My professional experience of counselling helped me to conduct interviews sensitively. Before the interview, I explained to my participants the purpose of my study and the belief that this can act 'as an eraser for emotional and behavioural residues' (Tesch, 1977:218). Hammersley (2010) suggested that the risk of participants' distress is minimized by maintaining a safety net of professionals who can provide support in emergencies. My strategies, therefore, enabled participants in research not to be harm psychologically and not to be-retraumatized.

In their study on domestic violence, Ellsberg and Heise, (2002:1600) suggest that victims had a vital opportunity by participating in research as that will 'welcome the opportunity to share their experiences with someone who will not judge or condemn them'. As Oakely (1981) also wrote, when researchers listen to participants' experiences very carefully and are simultaneously empathetic with their stories, they can give something back to them emotionally. As such, interviews involving sensitive questions in my research provided an opportunity for North Korean escapees who wanted to tell their stories, be heard and acknowledged. My experience as a counsellor for victims also provided emotional and practical support for North Korean escapees.

3.6.3 Duty to bear witness

As rapport with the participants were established, some interviewees revealed apologetically that they had provided a false identity - false name, age and hometown - in our earlier encounters and added that unless they felt intimate they were hesitant to reveal their true

identity. Most of my interviewees stated that they were afraid of their family members in North Korea being punished for their migrating to South Korea and hid their identities or any related information to the best of their efforts. The interviews which began with an honest revelation often became a stage where the interviewees described their experiences and suffering which they could not or did not do under ordinary circumstances for the following three reasons. First, as mentioned before, there were no “listeners”. The extent of their horrible experiences were far beyond ordinary citizens’ belief or imagination in South Korea - possibly generated discomfort in accepting it in a way - and the discussions would not progress much further than mere fact checks on their narratives. Second, some potential participants were apprehensive of going through their suffering again while recalling their traumatic experiences whereas some were not convinced whether their voices would be taken seriously. Some even said “It is all in the past and I have already forgotten it, why would I want to bring it out again?” Finally, there was a doubt that their experiences might be regarded merely as some individual experiences and thus might not be publicly acknowledged as a general and structural issue.

During the interviews, however, the participants appeared to gradually overcome the suspicions. When attempting to recall their past, some began with bursting into tears and some tried to ensure that I would trust their narratives by repeatedly saying ‘Would you be able to listen to what happened? I had so much suffering and I wish someone would understand me.’ In fact, what they went through in camps were quite extraordinary and totally beyond one’s imagination.

A testimony is held at the very place where the speaker finds a listener. My interviewees began to describe the horrific experiences at camps, in particular, torture, forced abortion rape, beating, watching death and fear of death. As the conversations developed and their hesitation faded out, the interviewees rather wanted to tell more about their suffering for longer. Some demonstrated how and in what posture they were tortured, and some brought the stick/hammer which are similar to the ones with which the officer beat them and performed the actions of the officers. A common theme in these was to illustrate the past through their body. Many interviewees in fact commonly asserted ‘you may or may not believe what I say but will believe what the scars on my body say, won’t you?’ Their body was the real and undeniable evidence of their suffering.

As a researcher, I was in a position to ask questions and at the same time to listen to their response often with suffering. I could encounter the suffering inside of these people as the research after all anticipates their experiences and suffering in many dimensions. During

the interviews, I arrived at the long-standing conundrum in Anthropology, the question of whether the researcher is to act to release them from suffering or to observe (Dossa, 2003: 52). Ruth Behar, an anthropologist, discussed this problem in her book *Vulnerable Observer* (2014), where she raised a question, in an exemplary case of a girl dying in an avalanche of snow, whether the photographer should record the scene or stop it to rescue her. Similarly, I kept asking, when the interviewees appealed their suffering, whether I should help them release it or continue to ask questions for research and observe them. My resolution was to pause the interview as it was not possible to record and document all their suffering for the psychological response of the researcher was not totally independent of the interviewees and their (narratives of) suffering. As Behar mentioned, absolute/complete objectivity is unattainable in research of Anthropology and emotions aroused during the fieldwork tend to remain with the researcher. In particular, those who witness others' pain, suffering, horror, sadness and misery during research need to take their own vulnerability into consideration.

For such fieldwork, therefore, researchers as well as the researched are put in a position to be confronted with suffering. I became aware that I was unable to record all their suffering and I consequently positioned myself within the boundary not othering them. Also, as Gammeltoft (2006:590) suggested, the listener is in a responsible and devoted relationship with the sufferer and I approached my interviewees based on interactions with other human beings rather than mere objects of research.

The escapees have not been given opportunities to speak out about their experiences. To some extent, it was their internal survivor guilt that stopped them from doing so. Some had an apprehensive voice saying 'our testimonies would not be seriously taken nor make any difference in reality.' Some even tried to hide what happened to them and were afraid of describing their experiences. Despite the hesitation, they had a desire to communicate with the world around them. Once they were convinced that their narratives were being heard, many interviewees wanted to ensure that their stories were documented in the thesis by repeatedly asking 'Could you make sure this part of the story is contained in your thesis?' They added that they decided to participate in the interviews when they watched how distortedly the life in North Korea and at camps were portrayed in the media. The documentation of their narratives produces written evidence for human right violations at camps. In other words, their testimony may start as an individual confession but expands into a political realm.

The story of the trauma becomes a testimony when spoken out, and it is personal and psychological confession on the one hand and sheds light on the public/structural sector of the society on the other (Herman, 1997:283). As Herman says, once the experiences of

individuals are publicized through verbal and/or written words, they are analyzed and interpreted in various different ways. It is hoped that this thesis acts as such a tunnel for North Korean escapees and that their experiences and narratives are historicized, contextualized and transmitted to the society. One of the main purposes of the thesis is thus to record and document their experiences as much based on their own descriptions as possible. It is worth noting that recalling and digesting the past experiences in their own words seemed to have a healing effect, albeit painful, as some interviewees explicitly said ‘It is the first time I talk about it and I now feel so liberated, I do not know why I wanted to keep it secret for so long and why I did not talk about it until today’ which may be a recovery through self-expressions.

My emotional risks were managed in various ways. When I sensed any emotional trauma while listening to interviews with my participants, I tried to pause the interview. My emotional difficulties were caused by the social and emotional isolation during my fieldwork. However, I was in support from the established academic and personal networks for my fieldwork in South Korea because that is my home country where I hold my previous degrees.

4. SUFFERING, TERROR, MOBILITY

4.1 Introduction

We have seen in the section titled ‘Ethical Considerations’ in the previous chapter on Research Design and Methods that my interviewees actively requested to have their experiences of suffering documented in my thesis. This chapter responds to that demand and records their suffering, especially from hunger and torture in concentration camps. In documenting that suffering, the chapter also adds to the academic literature, which has to date included little interview data on North Korean’s experience in the camps, and addresses a more general silence on the topic. For although there are NGOs and international agencies that draw attention to the rights violations experienced by North Koreans, it remains difficult to speak of their suffering, especially in the South Korean society. This is because the Korean War has not officially ended - though an armistice was signed in July 1953, no peace treaty has subsequently been signed. The two separate governments both claim to be the legitimate government of all of Korea, and neither accepts the border at the 38th parallel as permanent. In the South Korean Constitution, for example, North Korea is a territory that has been seized by terrorists and thus appears as land to be regained. The generations who experienced the trauma of war in the 1950s have a particularly strong tendency to think of North Koreans as their greatest enemies and to regard North Korean escapees as spies or agents of the North Korean state, and to imagine them as posing a threat to South Korean society. As a result, although South Korea accommodates the largest number of North Korean escapees and almost automatically issues citizenship to escapees after a decision-over-protection period, the testimony of North Korean escapees is popularly regarded with suspicion. It is not always fully accepted and often outrightly denied as lies. In this social atmosphere of hostility and suspicion, escapees have often had no opportunity to speak of their suffering, or even to listen to their own inner voices. Moreover, the opportunities to speak of hardship and torture that are provided to North Korean escapees are typically highly politicized. In the US as well as South Korea, the horrors that North Koreans have endured are reported and used by journalists, politicians and NGO actors seeking to portray the North Korean regime and

its political system as a failure. One of the right-wing TV stations in South Korea recently broadcasted a programme titled ‘What hungry North Koreans could not have eaten?’ where they hosted North Korean escapees and encouraged them to talk of how they were so desperate that they even ate the meat of rat, soil and tree roots (CHANNEL A, 2016). Rather than inviting the audience to understand and sympathize with the suffering undergone by the North Koreans, their harsh experiences were approached and presented merely as an indicator of the inferiority the North Korean regime. In the process of interviewing, it was also clear that interviewees feared being disbelieved. As they recounted their life-stories in vivid detail, they frequently prefaced statements about what they had endured with remarks such as ‘You may not believe it but...’ and ‘It is so true that...’ as if they felt the need to assert the authenticity of their suffering and demand credence from the listener/researcher. Their physical and psychological suffering at the hands of the North Korean regime and its violence were central to their life-narratives, and this suffering does not just reside in their memory but is engraved on their bodies and lives in many ways. One of my interviewees, for example, had rickets as his food ration was interrupted. He consequently developed an ill-formed body shape with which he has to live for the rest of his life - his height measures less than 4 feet, and his arms and legs are still bent. Some interviewees who were tortured in concentration camps suffer from permanent disabilities from leg or elbow injuries. They describe such symptoms as lasting bodily scars that constantly remind them of their painful past. In particular, the constant reminder of torture contributes to a deep psychological trauma. Recognizing that their suffering is not only of the past, but also part of the present continuous, this chapter attempts to historicize it by documenting and making visible their experience. The first half of the chapter looks at how the interruption, or termination for some regions, of food ration in North Korea due to its economic deterioration and diplomatic isolation gave rise to suffering from hunger. It shows that the extent and severity of hunger triggered instinctive survival mechanisms, both physically and psychologically, resulting not only in the consumption of inedible substances but also pushing people to cross the border to China in search of food. The second part of the chapter considers the forced repatriation of North Koreans from China and the violence and torture they experienced in concentration camps in North Korea. It is necessary to understand the suffering described in this chapter in order to be able to make sense of the data presented in the remainder of the thesis, for my interviewees’ accounts of their experience as migrants in China and elsewhere, and their evaluation of the different situations they faced during their journeys and sojourns abroad, are all framed through reference to their suffering in North Korea. Moreover, there are themes

that emerge from their narratives of suffering that are core concerns in the analysis of mobility that is developed through the thesis as a whole. These themes are briefly noted in the conclusion to the chapter.

4.2 *Suffering from hunger*

Chapter 1 discussed the historical context of hunger due to North Korea's economic failure, natural disasters, and the collapse of the former Soviet Union - and hence the loss of its economic support. Economic stagnation in North Korea brought food rations to a halt in the three northern provinces between 1994 and 1999, and, as North Korean people were heavily reliant on such rations, they struggled to survive. The government named the subsequent famine the 'Arduous March' or 'March of Suffering' after the apocryphal fable of Kim Il-sung who is described as a commander of a small group of anti-Japanese guerrillas fighting against thousands of Japanese enemies in severe cold, braving a heavy snowfall and starvation for the independence of the country during the Japanese colonization period. Terms such as 'famine' and 'hunger' were abandoned, as they implied government failure. When the government abolished the ration supply for the three northern provinces in 1994, Kim Jong-il directly ordered for self-sufficiency for the people of Hamgyongbukdo or equivalently North Hamgyong Province. The province of North Hamgyong is believed to have been chosen as sacrificial lamb as most of its citizens come from low rank social backgrounds. In addition, some North Korean escapees state that there was a shortage of electricity and fuel throughout the country and Hamgyongbukdo was chosen as it is the furthest from Pyongyang and thus most demanding for food transportation (Haggard and Noland, 2009).

According to some sources, from the mid 1990s, about 30% of the population in the province of North Hamgyong starved to death and most people suffered from malnutrition. As North Hamgyong Province shares the border with China, it is also the province that produced the largest number of escapees (Park et al., 2010). Approximately 70% of North Korean escapees in South Korea come from this province and they state that their main motivation was economic rather than political, i.e. they wanted to ease the hunger (SKMU, 2017). My interviewees seem to reflect the overall statistics in that just over 70% of them come from North Hamgyong Province and describe hunger as the most challenging pain. They commonly add that nobody could survive without food rations - people would at first sell furniture and household goods, then borrow money for food, but ultimately could not avoid hunger.

Jeongseok recalls the period of economic failure and famine as follows:

“We worked all day but only got one meal per day. It was a bowl of very watery soup. Some people died from starvation within a few days and most of us suffered from malnutrition for over two to three years. When malnutrition became more serious, many people could not even walk and so did not have enough energy to cross the border to China. It was a helpless death in hunger and there was nothing they could do. . . . During 1990s, the so-called Arduous March, I was the chief of my village who recorded and counted the number of dead people week by week. There were about 3,600 residents living in my village. From 1996 to 1999, I had to take care of 15 to 16 dead bodies every day. I was so worried that one of dead bodies may be one of my children’s soon.”

The aura of death quietly approached them. Rumor would say that someone in the neighbouring town died, then there would be talk about the death of one of the neighbours. Hak-cheol suffered from the intense fear of death and felt that his neighbour’s death signaled a similar future for his own:

“Since the middle of 1990s, I had seen many dead bodies around the neighbourhood who were close to me. They starved to death which made me really scared that I would be one of them next morning.”

In the narratives of my interviewees, the fear of death gradually dawning on them peaks when a member of family dies. Miseon recollects her experience when her husband starved to death and she was so afraid of following his path:

“My husband died from starvation. While I and my daughter stayed in my mother’s house, he did not manage to survive. When we came back home, he was sitting on the wooden bench, but seemed immobilized and very rigid. We shook him but could not wake him up. It was guilt and sadness of his death at first but soon I got so terrified that my daughter and I could end up like him.”

Experience of the death of those closest to them lifted their fear to a different level, so much so that some interviewees decided to move to China to avoid starvation. The story of Hwaran provides an example where she migrated to China soon after witnessing her father’s death:

“When my father was alive, we had just enough to live on. We used to have meals at least, even though it was only one or two corns at a time or on a day. When my father fell sick one day though, he did not eat at all, not even small

pieces of corns. When I left home early in the morning for school, I would put one piece of corn nearby his bed. He would not have it until I was back home, even if it was very late in the afternoon. I would ask him ‘Why didn’t you eat this corn? You should eat something to stay alive!’ He used to reply ‘You would have nothing to eat if I had it.’ We lived like that for several weeks and one day he seemed to struggle to breathe and started chocking. I thumped his back several times to stop it but he didn’t respond to it. I repeated it so many times that eventually I lost the count. I did not know that he had already gone. I saw that his eyes were not closed though, I saw it. A few hours elapsed and he still did not move. By the time, I realized his death on the one hand but could not accept it on the other. I contacted my cousins who lived nearby. They came to the house and closed his eyes which I could not do till the end. I could not even bear to see his closed eyes. It was my Arduous March, the great famine in North Korea. Before he died, he said to me many times ‘You should survive, so go to China. You will do that, won’t you?’ I could not say anything to him at the time because I never thought that I could live in another country. I did not have the courage to go to China. When he passed away though, I was so scared to be like him.”

Hwa-ran added that it was her fear of death more than the sadness of losing her father that eventually made her move to China. While the fear drove some interviewees to cross the border to China, those who did not or could not escape had to deal with intensified desire for food, perhaps biologically triggered for survival. The quality and quantity of the food no longer mattered at all and the only concern for them was to suppress the hunger and the thereby fear of death to any degree. For Mi-Jung soil was the only substance to which she had an access to rid herself of pain of extreme hunger. Although it seemed to be a temporary remedy for hunger, it soon caused a different pain of indigestion:

“During that period of time, there was nothing to eat. People in my village had to subsist on grass and its roots. It did not last too long and, as the grass and roots were running out, people started to eat the barks off the trees. The village was surrounded by pine trees and we had eaten nearly all the barks on them by making some kind of bread and pancakes from it. When all the trees were finally consumed, we began to dig in the ground and ate the soil. We had a somewhat special type of soil called Paengnyeongto which feels soft and tastes sweet. We could make pancakes with it and everything seemed okay when we

had it. As time goes by though, most of us started to suffer from indigestion and we realized that it got stuck in the stomach and intestine, and makes the organs heavy. Children went through great pain as they could not digest it at all and some did not make it in the end. The adults were just about managing it as long as they dig each other's anal passages to get the soil out of the intestine, which was also the difficult part for children. I would do it for my children's intestines and I could see that they were going through a lot of pain which in turn caused me considerable distress. Then, it gradually occurred to me that I had to do something about it and to get us all out of this suffering. I really wanted to save my and my children's lives."

For bare survival, they had no choice but to eat soil, the only swallowable substance around but unsuitable - socioculturally as well as biologically - for human intake. Such extreme experience has psychological as well as physical consequences, leading to a downgrade in their self-identification from civilized and cultural persons to merely biological human beings with only the desire to survive. For example, Yun-jeong spoke of herself as an 'inferior being' in comparison even to other animals when she had to dig rats' holes and stole their food. She saw only the biological needs left inside her and it caused a huge psychological dilemma:

"I dug into rats' holes in the field at night. I did not do that during the day as I felt ashamed about it. Throughout the night though, I searched for rice that rats would save in their places. The amount of rice that I would collect over a night was fairly handful. If I did not have it, I would be dead already. I also had grass roots, the barks of trees and soil and so on. Stealing food from the rats is the normally last resolution before death. How miserable is it? You feel worse than rats yourself. I was born as a human-being who is supposed to be better off than rats. I felt so miserable and frustrated to sustain my body. I thought I would rather die than living like a lesser existence than rats. I wanted to eat and live like a proper human being, so I decided to cross the river."

As described in the previous quotes from the interviews, one of the most prominent motivations for them to move to China was to escape from the pain of extreme hunger of a biological nature.

"I wanted not to die in hunger but to live so I crossed the river. It was not an honorable reason but, unless I crossed the border to China, I would not have been able to survive. In North Korea, I witnessed dead bodies everyday and I

could not stop thinking that I would be one of them one day. As the starvation got worse, I started to think that, even if I was to die tomorrow, I would like to have a proper meal but could not let my son starve to death. I was then told by a friend of mine that, once we go to China, we could make some money there.”
(Jeong-suk)

Beyond a certain threshold, hunger overwhelms any other desires. In other words, the very basic biological needs, most notably the demand for minimal nutrition to sustain the body, takes precedence over any political and moral precepts. North Koreans had been educated to praise their regime with no opportunities to get acquainted with other political systems or ideologies. They would sing the song ‘Nothing to envy’ to augment their confidence in the Stalinist and dictatorial government. Their firm belief in the rightness of the regime would suppress any qualms about the lack of freedom in religion, movement, profession, and so on. However, the extent and severity of the pain of hunger they suffered led many of my interviewees to start to question their long-held beliefs: ‘If you do not eat anything for three days, you no longer care about the ideologies.’ Twenty-three of my forty-five interviewees made the same statement, almost word by word, and irrespective of their sex, age, class, sociocultural background and religion. It seems that such a consensus was shared amongst North Koreans with their experience as economic failure and the steady collapse of the system became evident.

Although the North Korean government presents its political system as based on socialism, its dictatorship is in fact rooted in the oriental patriarchy where the king (or the queen) would look after his (her) people like parents do their children. For this reason, Kim Jong-un is worshiped as Sooryungnim - meaning the head of state literally - but it contains the nuance of ‘the great father’ in Korean. North Korean people do believe and expect that their Sooryungnim would nourish their life, or at least they did until the famine hit the country in 1990s whereby, with the severe pain of hunger, the doubt on their Sooryungnim whom they sincerely trusted and followed started to creep in. For example, Mi-jung felt when she could no longer endure the pain of hunger after the food ration stopped, that she was abandoned by Sooryungnim:

“In North Korea, the first words you learn are not father or mother, but Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Sooryungnim. So was the case for me. When I was young, if my father brought the food ration home, I would bow to the picture of Sooryungnim to thank him instead of my father. I had a huge sense of loyalty and was ready to shed blood for my country and for the great father. When the

food ration stopped in my region, I did not feel that Sooryungnim cared about me anymore. I was so hungry and I even felt that I was abandoned by him.”

As in Mi-jung’s narrative, others spoke of how ‘my hunger betrayed my belief’. The immediate and basic need for food became the driving force to cross the border, overcoming long-standing beliefs and political loyalty to the regime. Cheol-ho testifies that although he was proud of the socialist values and of the North Korean regime and had been a loyal supporter of the Kim family, as the weight of famine grew and he and his young children struggled to survive, he started losing his faith:

“As my children were struggling with the hunger, there was nothing more important to care about. I thought that I had the deepest sense of loyalty for the party and the government. The country has no right to expect loyalty from its people when it fails to protect them. I did not or could not openly speak it out but I could not resist the feeling from the bottom of my heart that the great leader betrayed us. So there were no reasons or attachments to agonize over leaving home. I really hated the great father and the fact that he could not feed his people. The whole family including myself were devoted members of the Communist Party. The possibility of escaping the country was unforgivable and unspeakable but, when there was absolutely nothing to eat, there seemed to be no other choices. These feelings and thoughts from the extreme hunger and also anger drove me to cross the border illegally to China.”

The suffering from such severe hunger -during this period was the result of the dictatorial political system of the North Korean regime. Although absolute poverty and hunger may now be reduced as the government has reformed some of its policies, the relics of malnutrition and the anger against the regime it spawned has been transmitted from generation to generation. For example, the physique of the generation now in their 20s who grew up during the Arduous March is distinctively underdeveloped. In some senses, then, the North Korean famine is not completely over. It remains engraved upon people’s bodies and minds. Since the mid-2000s, North Korean people have been concerned more about malnutrition and critical diseases thereof, since the fear of death from starvation has been slowly relieved. The economy is still not on a full recovery curve and the social trauma of the Arduous March has an aftermath. While foreign and international aid has ameliorated the situation a little, people are still struggling to survive as a result of persistent malnutrition and even minor infections resulting from it. Meanwhile, as the number of migrants to China surged from 1997

and social remittances transferred by those are in, or who have been to, China escalated, the possibility of moving to China has become more widely known. A third of my interviewees were born after 2005 and left North Korea after 2010. Though they acknowledge that they did not suffer from hunger as much as those who left the country before 2000, they state that the economy has not improved much over the last ten or fifteen years. North Korean people continue to escape from their country in order to escape the pain of hunger. However, escape can lead to more and different suffering, as discussed in the next section.

4.3 Suffering and torture in North Korean concentration camps

North Koreans who left their home in search of food and shelter in China have been forcibly repatriated to North Korea based on the agreement between North Korea and China in 1986. Although North Koreans are eligible to be granted refugee status in fulfillment of the UN refugee convention, the Chinese government has continued to arrest and repatriate them neglecting international agreements and laws on North Koreans' human rights in China, including the UN convention and North Korean Human Right Acts established in the U.S. There is no official data for the numbers of North Koreans who are repatriated from China to North Korea. Yet, according to statistics from South Korean government, ten percent of the total number of North Koreans in South Korea, currently around 32,000, had experienced repatriation from China to North Korea (SKMU, 2017).

Repatriated North Koreans are defined as criminals and punished for their unauthorized border-crossing to China. Unauthorized departure, i.e. without a permit or a valid passport, even to China, is prohibited by law in North Korea. Article 233 of the North Korean Criminal Code provides (NKHR, 2009:39): "One who crosses the border without permission shall be punished by a sentence of three years or less labour re-education".

Article 47 of the Code also provides that:

One who escapes to another country or to the enemy in betrayal of his motherland and people, or who commits treacherous acts towards the motherland such as espionage or treason, shall be punished by at least seven years or more labour-re-education. If it is a serious violation, he shall be punished by execution and forfeiture of all property (extracted from Human Right Watch, 2002:21).

From the 1990s to the 2000s, the North Korean government handled the returnees from China in various ways. Before the Great Famine of the 1990s, they were regarded as political betrayers who turned to capitalism from socialism and all sent to political prison camps

(Suh et al., 2002, 175). They were severely tortured and even executed (Yoon, 2001). As the food shortages came to threaten North Koreans' lives over the next 5-6 years, an increasing number of people crossed the border to China in order to seek food or earning money with the intention of coming back to home (Choi, 2010:92). As the number of people escaping to China increased, the North Korean government treated them more leniently. According to NGO reports, especially in 1999 and thereafter when the greatest number of North Koreans went to China for food, it is said that there were so many escapees that they had to weaken the level of punishments. These reports add that the North Korean returnees who were repatriated at this time, especially those who went simply for food or for earning money rather than for political reasons, were released after a confinement of a few days or months only (Human Right Watch, 2002:70).

Since 2002 when the first returnees started to re-escape and then be repatriated again, the government increased the punishment of repatriated North Koreans. There are other factors that are viewed as aggravating the offence, and that can lead to heavier punishment with some returnees sentenced to prison camps from a few months to several years or to public execution in the extreme cases. The returnees who are subject to severe penalties are: those who committed a crime in North Korea and then went to China to avoid punishment; those who went to China to finally move to and settle in South Korea or another country; those who intended to acquire a residency in China; those who, with evidence, had sexual contact with Chinese people, or those who married in China or conceived a child with a Chinese groom; those who had contacts with South Koreans, foreign missionaries, pastors or NGO people; those who had contacts with reporters; and those who escaped to China more than once (Human Right Watch, 2002:74). In the case of my own interviewees, those arrested around the borderland between North Korea and China were sentenced with weaker punishments than those who were arrested near the border between China and other countries such as Mongolia and Cambodia. This difference in punishment reflects different perceptions of escapees' intentions in China. The latter were regarded as betrayers who intended to travel to South Korea or a third country. They were sentenced with imprisonment for several years, while the former were viewed as simple unauthorized border-crossers. One male interviewee, Chul-soo said:

“I was arrested while travelling to near the border with Cambodia. I was suspected of planning to go to South Korea but stubbornly did not admit to that. Even though the investigators had tortured me in Bowibu for three or four months by beating, I did not say anything about my journey to South Korea.

I witnessed that many people in Bowibu confessed their intentions for going to South Korea and then were sent to labour prison camp for years. While they beat me, I talked to myself over and over, ‘Don’t say about it, if so, my children will never see their father.’”

With this effort, Chul-soo was eventually sentenced to labour training camp for one year in Bowibu, National Security Agency, where escapees were sent right after being delivered by the Chinese public security or national security agents to North Korea. At Bowibu, the prisoners face a preliminary screening which decides whether they are dispatched to other facilities for further investigations or punishments. Those who committed political crimes are typically sent to Social Safety Bureau for further investigations. For relatively minor (economic) crimes and illegal border crossing, they are sent to the labour training camps. In most common cases, all the repatriated among my interviewees were sent to either labour training camps or labour prison camps - the latter is called ‘Kyohwaso’ in Korean and is also known as labour re-education camps. More serious criminals, including those who crossed the border without the government’s permission several times, murders and rapists, are normally sent to labour prison camps for at least 3 years (Human Right Watch, 2002).

The whole process from being arrested in China to imprisonment in labour camps in North Korea entails the following stages: imprisonment in Chinese local police stations → detention in the detention centres near border in China → delivery to bowibu National Security Agency for interrogation between one and 6 months → detention in jibkyulso provincial detention centres for about one or two months or Social Safety Bureau office for the further investigation → imprisonment in labour camps (either training or prison camps) between 6 months and one year. After release, however, many re-enter China. This process is illustrated well by this extract from a female interview with Mi-Jung:

“I was arrested in 2005 by Chinese police at Yenji and had been custody in a jail near the police station for two weeks. As I was identified as a North Korean, I was sent to a detention centre in Helong, where many North Korean escapees were already detained. I was told that there were many on a waiting list ready to be sent back to North Korea, so I needed to wait for my turn. After it had been 8 or 9 weeks, I was delivered with other North Korean escapees to North Korea by a bus. It seemed like the fear of being repatriated spread out to everyone there and almost all started to cry or weep as soon as they got on the bus including me. We arrived to the Bowibu the National Security Agency in Musan in North Korea. After a preliminary screening, we were imprisoned in

a jail named Guryujang, there waiting for interrogation. I was interrogated in a security office five times. The investigator accusingly asked me “Why did you go to China?” a thousand times and beat me up many times when I answered “I went to China for food and intended to come back with food”. I insisted that I did not intend to get to South Korea and had nothing with Christians, NGOs, South Koreans and Americans. After three months of investigation, I was sent back to jibkyulso in my home town and detained there for one month and then sent to a labour training camp in On-Sung. I served a year as a prisoner there and managed to survive. While being there, there were only two things in my mind: one was to survive and the other was re-escaping again.”

As illustrated by this case, many of my interviewees had severely harsh experiences in the process of repatriation in custody and correction facilities, and said that those experiences motivated them to re-escape from North Korea. According to NGOs’ statistics, around a half of repatriated North Koreans crossed the border into China again after release (International crisis group, 2006; Han et al., 2015).

Human right abuses of North Koreans in the camps have received enormous and persistent attention from international communities. North Korean prison camps have been compared with Nazi camps and North Korean prisoners have been described as the equivalent of “Auschwitz survivors” in media, NGO publications, and academic studies (Independent, 2017; UN Commission of Inquiry report, 2014). Thomas Buergenthal (cited in Independent, 2017), who was in Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen as a child, as well as the ghetto of Kielce, Poland, said: “I believe that the conditions in the [North] Korean prison camps are as terrible, or even worse, than those I saw and experienced in my youth in these Nazi camps and in my long professional career in the human rights field”. While the extensive human rights violations in the camps of North Korea are documented in some academic literature (Chang et al, 2008; Jang and Son, 2014; Lee, 2006), the focus has mainly been on the post-camp trauma from the perspective of social welfare, rather than on everyday practices in the camps. A number of studies show that North Korean escapees exhibit various traumas. For example, according to Chang et al. (2008), many of these traumas are related to torture and death. Of the 1,346 respondents, 87% witnessed public execution; about 70% observed tortures directly; and approximately 80% lost family, relatives or/and friends to starvation. These results are supported by some other studies conducted on North Korean escapees in South Korea (e.g. see Jang and Son, 2014). Both studies found that this suffering motivated the victims to cross the border to China again. My interviewees’ narratives are consistent with the findings of this

research. Even though some of my interviewees had not experienced repatriation, they had all experienced this kind of trauma. This is because they also were investigated, detained and imprisoned in the detention or correction facilities and prison camps such as Guryujang in Bowibu, Jibgyul-so and labour camps for other reasons. Whether repatriated nor not, the experience of traumatic events led my interviewees to re-escape from North Korea. In the following section, I will explore how North Koreans' suffering through repatriation and detention in camps led to their decision to re-escape from their country.

4.3.1 Experiences of those held in the Bowibu (State Security Department of North Korea) either following repatriation or arrest for other crimes

Entering the Bowibu: humiliation and insult

“When staying in my relatives’ house, I was arrested by the soldiers of the unit in the border area because of a neighbour’s tale-telling. After being detained for two to three days in the unit, I was moved into the prison in Helong of Jilin province in China, where I saw North Korean people being held in detention for compulsory repatriation. There were seven to eight cells: each cell was as small as 3 or at its maximum 5 pyeongs. There were around 10 people in one cell, and I stayed there for one week. On arriving at Musan, we were placed temporarily in the prison of the State Security Department. When we entered the Musan prison, the jailors beat us mercilessly, which was ‘for our discipline.’ This torturous beating did not stop until one of the prisoners threw up and fell down. In Musan prison, where ten circles faced each other, there were five cells used only for the North Korean escapees. Around 25 North Korean escapees were imprisoned in a small cell whose area seems a little bit over 3 pyeongs. At night, in such a cramped room, they had to take a nap being piled up on top of each other. Powder made out of corn chaff and washy salt water was all the food we had. Some people, who had stayed there around 6 months due to the unfinished preliminary investigation, were so rawboned that they looked like a skeleton. Ten days later after imprisonment in the Musan prison, I was transferred to Pyongyang Bowibu, because my residency was Pyongyang.”

This is an extract from an interview with Jeongseok, a male repatriate, who told me how he was caught in China and taken to Bowibu. His experience mentioned above is a typical example that can represent my other interviewees’ experience of forced repatriations.

According to them, the hardest thing to endure throughout the procedure from China to the imprisonment in Bowibu of North Korea was, in the case of men, beating and insulting without reason, as Jeong-seok was beaten without stopping. In addition to this, women were subjected to naked inspections, inspection of their uterus, and sexual molestation and violence. Sunbok, a woman who had lived in a re-education camp for three years after being caught trying to cross the Mongol border, said that what was more horrible than the life in the re-education camp was the naked body inspection.

“Before being imprisoned in the jail of Bowibu, they conduct an inspection in order to find out if the repatriates have brought money or drugs from China and hidden them. There may have been more than 30 female repatriates. They told us to take off all our clothes and bend our waists forward. Then, one of them put his finger into the anus and stirs it. They put the same finger into the vagina, too. More than ten women were inspected before me, and in my turn the inspector used the same finger already used for those other women. Yet, really, when he stirred inside of me with his finger, I closed my mouth firmly in order to hold throwing up. Because, if we throw up or bend forward when they put their fingers, we were trampled down ruthlessly. It was so shameful and humiliating, and I do not want to experience it ever again.”

Sharing Sunbok’s experience, Ji-sun also talked about her experience of humiliating sexual insult/abuse, which was the inspection of the uterus:

“The inspector examined by putting his finger in rubber glove into my vagina and anus. That glove already entered others’ vaginas and anuses. I could see all the dirt and mess sticking to the glove. I resisted the inspection, saying that I did not want the inspection and I hid nothing. Then, he kicked me with a shod foot and made me bend forward. After forcing me to bend forward and spread my legs apart he inspected me. Giggling, he said to me, “how many times did Chinese penises enter here? Now that you are silent, you should have liked it” and then stirred more roughly. Really, at that moment, I felt like an idiot about myself who had been thinking only about our Great Leader for the last 40 years, felt such a humiliation and wanted to die.”

Yunjeong also mentioned the naked body inspection as sexual violation:

“...in the beginning, in order to find if we carry any money, Bowibu had us

jump 200 times and repeat sitting down and standing up. Men sat in the corridor and looked at us.”

Men were also forced to do a naked standing jump, but they did not describe this as an insulting experience. However, women expressed feelings of aversion about the naked body inspection itself, and described the vaginal inspection as the most humiliating and insulting experience. Women had often been married, due to which they were suspected of having sex with Chinese men and suffered sexual violence, being treated as women whose purity was ‘sullied’ by foreigners. Violation and persecution of women’s bodies and sexuality also took the form of forced abortion. Two of my interviewees were forced into abortions in Bowibu when repatriated, and around five people reported having seen or listened to forced abortions. One of the two interviewees who were forced into abortion did not know that she was pregnant. During the enforced repatriation, she discharged blood due to severe violence, and lost her child. Another woman already had a bloated belly during the enforced repatriation. Before the naked body inspection, the inspector forced her to abort the child, saying that he could not allow her to enter North Korea while carrying Chinese seeds in her. Hwa-ran said as follows:

“He said that you could not enter with the ‘dirty seeds’ of Chinese and they should be destroyed. He gave me hot salt water and some drug. I said I did not want to take it. Then, he said I had to choose between taking this pill or public execution. I had no choice but to take the drug. Once taking it, I felt hot in my lower abdomen and kept discharging blood. With no sanitary napkin, I rolled the clothes I wore and inserted them between my legs. That is how I lost my first child.”

Hwa-ran received additional punishment for having been pregnant and lived in a labour training camp for one year. Another interviewee, Hwasun, who knew that pregnant women received more severe punishment as well as forced abortion, managed to hide her pregnancy. She gave birth to a baby after the trial in Bowibu, and was then sent to a re-education camp. Among my interviewees, there were even the cases of abortion that occurred during the harsh compulsory labour in training camps or re-education camps.

About half of all my interviewees had been investigated while imprisoned in Bowibu. Of these, half were investigated after being forcibly repatriated from China while the other half was subject to the investigation due to being caught or accused of smuggling, or acts of treason against the country such as watching South Korean films or dramas, selling South Korean film CDs, or going to church.

Guryujang ‘Ddong-gan’: interrogation and detention

Guryujang is a detention facility located in Bowibu building. Because people were sent to the Bowibu of the region they were registered in, their statements about Guryujang vary depending upon the regions of their registration. However, thirty-six of my forty-five interviewees were from the North Hamgyong Province, and therefore they made statements about the Guryujang of the Bowibu located in Onseong, Hoeryeong, Cheongjin. An interviewee from Onseong said that in Guryujang, a room, around three to four pyeong in size, accommodated six to seven persons, and the Guryujang had eight to nine of such rooms. The interviewees from Cheongjin said that there were six to seven rooms in the basement, and each room accommodated around 10 persons. The interviewees from other regions made different statements: people from Pyeongan Province said that those who would be sent to the prison camps of the political criminals were accommodated in different rooms from those sent to training camps. Statements differ among these interviewees.

However, those who experienced the different Guryujang belonging to the different Bowibu in the North Hamgyong Province called Guryujang ‘Ddong-gan.’ In Korean, ‘Ddong-gan (똥간)’ is a slang and an informal expression used for referring to a malodorous conventional type of toilet. The English equivalent can be latrine or khazi. Literally translated into English, ‘Ddong (똥)’ in Ddong-gan (똥간) can be poo (똥) and ‘gan (간)’ room. Most people said that the cell always smelled of excretion as it contained a conventional type of toilet, and they called the cell ‘Ddong-gan’ because they lived with their own excrement. Also, the Guryujang in On-seong was what had once been a pigsty, and that was why it reeked of excrements here and there. Thus, they called Guryujang pig ‘Ddong-gan’. So far, I have not found the word ‘똥간(Ddong-gan)’ in any of government publications, NGO reports, academic studies, or magazines.

The reason why the Guryujang became Ddong-gan was directly stated by my interviewees previously, but my analysis of the indirectly stated talk about Ddong-gan shows another reason. In the Guryujang, prisoners get punished if they do not obey orders from jailors. The jailors punished my interviewees using the filthiness of poo, and this seems to be the reason why my interviewees thought Guryujang as ‘Gan’(room) with ‘Ddong’ (poo). Jinsuk said as follows:

In Guryujang, since there is not enough space to lie down, people sleep, lying on the side close together. Also during the day time, we should just sit with our back straight all day long. If footsteps are heard, we have to sit with our head down. When the patrol man calls the roll, we should fall on our faces. But, if we take a bad position or talk to the inmates

next to us, they trample on our heads behind. Sometimes I was near the conventional toilet, and my head was thrust into it. Recalling the moment, I still have acid reflux due to the disgusting smell.

Punishment included physical battery and verbal insults, but for many interviewees, the most painful and humiliating punishments had to do with faeces. For example, jailors made them lick faeces or urine near the conventional toilet or drink the excrement filled water inside it. Also, because the toilet inside the Guryujang was a conventional type with a deep tub filled with feces and night soil, throwing prisoners into the toilet itself was also used as a punishment.

Witnessing hunger, malnutrition, death: Disposable bodies

People who had been in labour training camps or re-education camps stated that Guryujang is the most horrible place due to lack of food. In labour training or re-education camps, visits were allowed, and family members or relatives brought food to them. In Guryujang, no visiting was allowed, and prisoners could eat only what was given. There, two meals were provided daily, with each one containing 150 grams of something like corn or salt water with a very little bit of cabbage in it. Most interviewees experienced weight loss and malnutrition in Guryujang. That hunger experience in turn provided the motivation for them to try to escape from North Korea again, as illustrated by the following statement from Hakcheol, a man who was imprisoned in Guryujang after being charged with treason against the country for selling Korean movies burned onto CDs:

“Have you ever seen the people who went insane with hunger? In Guryujang, we can often find such people. Some kept mimicking the act of eating, dribbling at the mouth. There were such people in my cell, too. At least we could eat grass roots, and later soil, and even bark during the Arduous March, but in the jail, there was nothing to eat. Such a small amount of corns was given that we could count them. I really counted them. They only gave us 15 to 20 grains of corn. The soup tasted only of salt, and when pieces of cabbage were found, we fought for those as if the cabbage were meat in meat soup.”

Other interviewees also mentioned the insanity brought about by hunger in Guryujang. Sunjeong, who was forcibly repatriated and imprisoned in Guryujang two times, for three months and six months respectively, said:

“Those who died of hunger at Ddong-gan all thought about their experience

in China where they had eaten well. If we think about eating eggs and bread at Ddong-gan, we die for hunger. We can survive only if we forget having eaten well in China. During my first stay at Ddong-gan, I very often remembered boiling and eating eggs in China. That memory stimulates us, and we salivate and keep being exhausted from hunger. Without knowing when we can get out of there, we have nothing to eat and keep feeling hungry, and all of these really drive us crazy. Among them, some really did go mad, and others suffered from hunger and ended up dying of serious malnutrition. During my first imprisonment of three months in Guryujang, I managed to survive. However, during the second imprisonment, as four months passed, without knowing when to be released I erased the memory of good food in China and endured that period with a thought of a fried pancake made of soil that I had eaten at the Arduous March. Trying to think of myself as a person who ate this little, I had even a few grains of corn with gratitude, and had salt water soup as if it were chicken soup with a smell and taste of meat. Eating in this way, I felt less hungry.”

In fact, among my interviewees, there are some who were sent to a mental hospital as extreme hunger induced insanity - in North Korea, mental hospitals are rather of quarantine cells than caring facilities and used to isolate those with an unstable mind as they could potentially disturb other workers. The suffering from hunger in Guryujang brings about malnutrition, various diseases and complications caused by the malnutrition, and can result in death. It is also accompanied by sense of futility coming from craving for the unattainable, the hallucinated vision of food or delirium, and psychological pain that leads to psychosis. Some of my interviewees mentioned the physical and psychological suffering separately, but in most cases, these appear to be a complicated combination of suffering. As previously stated, Sun-jeong, psychologically overcame her physical pain of hunger, by willing herself to give up attachment to food. However, Buni, another female interviewee, whose mind was completely overwhelmed by the physical, ended up suffering the psychological pain of psychosis.

4.3.2 *Interrogation and torture*

Physical pain and suffering

North Korean people's life in Guryujang consists of two states: being interrogated and waiting for interrogation. My interviewees said in common as follows. Suffering in Guryujang such as hunger and various kinds of violation of human rights was already too much to endure, but

this pain was nothing compared to the pain they were put to during interrogation. Those who had been forcibly repatriated were repeatedly asked why they had gone to China, if they had contacted South Korean people or churches, and so on, and all these questions were followed by physical torture. Jeongyun described her interrogation in this way:

“‘Have you seen South Koreans?’ No, said I. Then, he slapped me on the face. It was such a hard slap that my mouth burst and bled inside and I was deafened. After beating, he asked ‘Have you gone to a South Korean church?’ and then slapped me on the face again, even before my answer coming. Then, I said that I had not even seen a church. He asked me, ‘What mission were you given by South Korea?’ and slapped me on the face again. Thus, I said I am not a spy. Then, he said ‘Where did you hear that word, a spy?’ slapping me again by turns. So, I reeled unsteadily, and he beat me, saying ‘Can’t you stand up straight? dirty bastard!’. Thus, I withstood, trying not to fall down. Seeing this, he said ‘See, you are being beaten without a teardrop and keep talking back.’ Then, he told me to take off all clothes and prostrate myself on the floor. I said I did not want to take off clothes, crying and begging. Then he said ‘Where did you learn this wicked trick?’ and beat me ruthlessly at random, with a square wooden stick.”

Jeongyun fainted while being beaten and was moved into Guryujang, where her legs were broken. With the broken legs she was transferred into Jibgyulso by Bowibu. Sunjeong was also asked the same question, but was subject to different torture.

“I was hung above with my hands shackled. Then, even with an inch of budging, the iron shackle cut into the hands, giving me acute pain. In this state, they asked ‘Didn’t you try to go to South Korea?’ and ‘Have you been in contact with South Koreans in China?’ If I answered ‘No, I never have done such thing,’ they said ‘I will release you, if you make an honest answer.’ As I said before, I had tried to go to South Korea, already having found a broker. However, it seemed that I should not tell that. I thought that if I told the truth, it would really ruin everything.”

After hanging me all day long, they came back, made me kneel down and inserted a square wooden stick between the knees. I felt a splitting pain in my knees. Things swam in front of my eyes, and the only thing I could think of was that I wanted to stop this pain at all costs. Then, in such a way, he asked again, “Didn’t you try to really go to South Korea?” I wanted to die after saying “yes”, but right at that time suddenly a thought of my son came to my

mind. If I say yes here, not only I but my son also dies. I should endure anyway. Thus, I kept saying no whatever they asked me. Even if I should die, I had to save my son's life.

Sunjeong was forcibly repatriated with her son. In Guryujang, women were separated from men, and so Sun-jeong did not know what had become of her son. However, she thought that if it was proved that they tried to go to South Korea, probably they would be sent to a political prisoner camp or publicly executed, and her son. Who had been caught with her in China, would be found guilty of the same crime. Many other interviewees also underwent the torture Sunjeong was put through, which is to be hung with the hands shackled. This is a cruel torture known as 'pigeon position': a position that prevents the victim from either standing or sitting down. Below is an illustration of this 'pigeon position' torture drawn by a North Korean escapee who directly experienced it in camps (Chosun news, 2011).

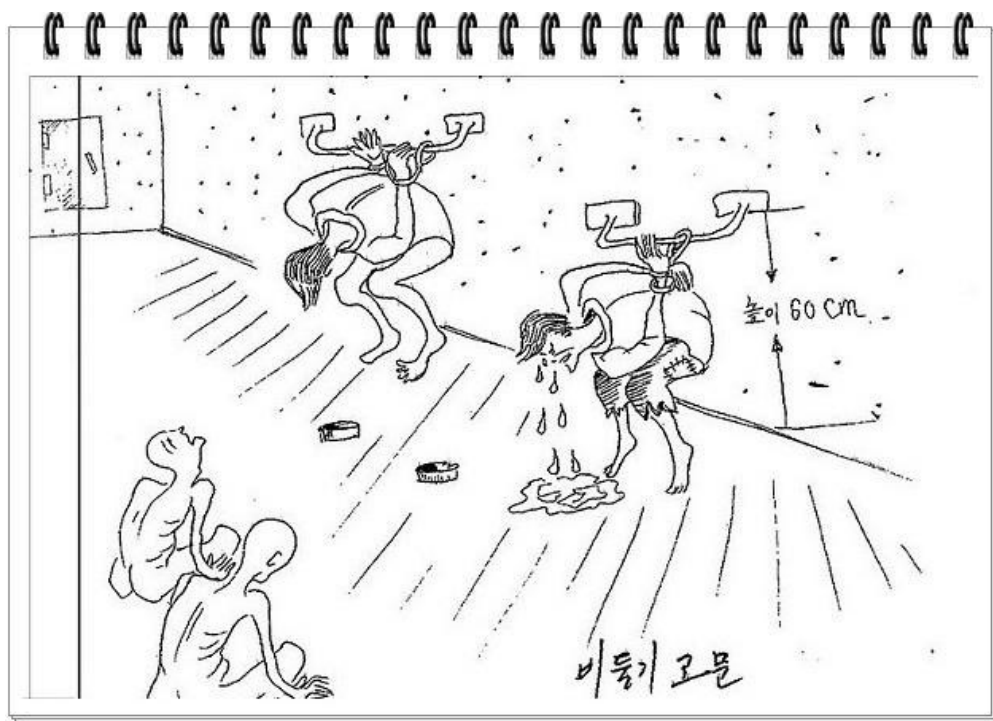


Fig. 4.1: Pigeon Position

In this illustration, North Korean people were hung at the height of 60cm with their hands shackled. At the bottom, 'pigeon torture' is written in Korean. Pigeon position is a very famous torture, testified by many North Korean escapees (Lee, 2007). According to the testimony of my interviewees, people who were tortured at Bowibu were often put through this pigeon torture, in which position they can neither sleep nor eat. If they do not move, all nerves in the body get numbed, and if they move even a bit, they suffer the pain of being cut into the skin by the shackle. Among my interviewees, people like Sunjeong who was forcibly

repatriated more than two times and those who were accused of the treason against the country were subject to this torture. Ryeonju, who served a one-year sentence in Guryujang and a 15-year sentence in a re-education camp, said:

“You know, there is a torture called ‘pigeon position.’ The one in which the hands are tied at the back. That pain is impossible to know without having direct experience. The whole body keeps shivering as if it is getting numb. In that state, one can neither eat nor sleep. If eating, one throws up because the body is tilted forward. Furthermore, I was in the eighth month of pregnancy. Because of the bloated belly, it was hard for me to endure more. I just wanted to die quickly.”

Being tortured in a pigeon position in three days in a row, Ryeonju saw her baby end up being aborted, and she herself was locked up alone in a cell:

“Something hot flew out between the legs, and I found myself bleeding. The whole body got blood soaked because of bleeding. Then, all of sudden, something came out, which I saw was a big clot of blood, a baby born dead. I do not remember after that. I may have fainted. You know, I am human. Then, they brought cold water in the bucket, threw me in the cement floor with no heating, in that cold winter, and then put the cold water over me. They told me to wake up and kicked me ruthlessly with a shod foot. After that, I may have fainted again. Then, waking up, I found myself in a solitary cell. How much I cried for the loss of my child. . . It was such a long night that I cannot describe in words.”

Interviewees like Ryeonju, whose cases were not of forcible repatriation but the charge of what is generally called treason such as smuggling, selling South Korean items, establishing or going to church, were told to confess their own sins rather than being asked concrete interrogating questions. Interviewees said that Bowibu was supposed to ‘disclose’ crimes, so once they were taken into the Bowibu investigation room, they had to confess their sins first. Hakcheol, who had been subject to ‘don’t ask torture’ along with the pigeon position torture, described the torture he was put through as follows:

“The hardest one was lack of sleep and beating. They kept beating me for three months, during which I could hardly sleep. Whenever I was about to fall asleep, they beat me up with a square wooden bar. If I was about to fall asleep again, they threw cold water. They kept torturing me locking me up alone in a cell. When they did not beat me, they hung me with two hands shackled and prevented me from sleeping.”

Psychological suffering from feeling not to be treated as 'human'

If I knew the sin I had committed for which they beat me, I might not feel that hard. Shouldn't I know on what suspicion they arrested me? They did not allow me to ask. They just beat me up, with no reason. At least, shouldn't they inform me of what kind of sin I committed, if I am a man?

Stating himself as 'a non-human being', Hakcheol also talked about the psychological suffering he experienced. Being taken to Bowibu without knowing why, he was tortured for six months. While he was put through torture, his family did not know that he was being tortured or even the fact that he was in Bowibu. He guesses that they tortured him because he amassed a considerable amount of wealth by smuggling and they wanted to take it from him. Hakcheol said being beaten without knowing his sin felt being reduced to an animal. He describes himself in torture as less than an animal:

"Beating without informing of the sin is not treating me as human. Later, I was treated as less than an animal. Being beaten, dogs can make a barking sound. I was prevented from screaming. If I made a groaning sound being beaten, they beat me more. I should make no sound. I shut my mouth firmly being afraid of making any sound. If that is not less than an animal, what else can that be?"

Due to the torture at this time, Hakcheol lost seven of his fingers. Showing his disabled hand, he said that he was still suffering even after coming to South Korea. Like Hakcheol, other interviewees also suffered from the psychological as well as physical pain caused by torture. Hwa-ran, who was caught and taken to Bowibu for selling Korean movies by burning them into CDs, was put to a relatively less harsh physical torture: being poked with a ball pen in her head in Bowibu. She said, however, that the torture led her into the great psychological pain:

"I was told to write down my sin on paper, and I did. Then, asking 'is this all?' they ruthlessly poked me in the face and the head with a ball pen. Thus, I wrote down again. Then, yelling at me 'write it down correctly,' they kept poking me in the head with the ball pen I wrote with. Bleeding from the head, I could not look ahead. Covered in blood, I swept down blood in my head, and said, 'I am sorry, I committed a deadly sin.' That misery is indescribable. I felt like my heart was torn into pieces. Bleeding did not bother me that much. The feeling of having no way out really made me shrink."

Telling me this story, Hwa-ran sobbingly showed her scars of torture by loosening her hair. At that point, I again asked a question. "If it is not too hard for you, could you tell me about your psychology at that time?"

She continued as follows:

"You know, whatever things come our way, we think that we have to go through these difficulties anyway. When my father starved to death, it was really hard, but we could make a plan such as getting corn from our aunt living in Gangwon-do. Our dad passed away while we returned from Gangwon-do, but it was not that regrettable because I could do something for my father. However, the investigation of Bowibu is different. Whatever stories I told, whatever stories I wrote down, I ended up being beaten anyway. They told me to confess my sin, and I did. Then, they kept beating me. They just kept beating me, hurling abuses at me like 'a bitch to kill by ripping limb from limb,' 'dirty bitch,' while looking at me as if I were a worm. I thought 'I am really dead now.' Well, I may have really died inside my heart."

Like Hwa-ran, Yeonsuk, caught with her daughter in China for smuggling the Bible, also recalled the psychological suffering rather than the physical. Tied up in a pigeon position, she saw her daughter being tortured, which was crueller to her than any other tortures she had experienced. When she told this story, she stood up suddenly and shouted. She shook her head, frowned, and had difficulty in talking. I told her that she did not need to say if it was too hard for her, but she said she was OK and started talking:

"It is ok to beat me because I brought the Bible, but why do they beat my daughter? They tied me up, and gave my daughter a blow at a time. Trembling all over and getting so angry, I yelled at them 'why beat my daughter?' Thereupon, they came and beat me ruthlessly, and then beat my daughter again. Kicking and punching, they beat ruthlessly. I really wanted to die. I yelled out, 'Kill me, tear me limb from limb and leave my daughter alone'. Then, they gagged me so that I could not speak. It was really hard to stand. I just wanted to die, but I could not."

In order not to see, she lowered her head and closed her eyes. Then, they put more brutal torture to my daughter, she said.

"Thinking I'd rather not see it, I hung my head down as deeply as possible and closed my eyes. Then, again, seizing me by the hair, they forced me to open

my eyes and see it. It seemed unsatisfactory to beat my daughter. Then, they drove nails one by one to my daughter's ears from the outer side and also to my hands too. Like Jesus being nailed to the cross. I did not feel painful in my hands, but thinking of the pain my daughter experienced, I felt an unendurable pain in my heart. Being nailed in my hands was nothing. It was a really heartbreaking, indescribable pain to leave my poor young daughter abandoned in this pain."

In order to escape from the suffering by any means, she chanted the Lord's prayer in the heart without making sound, she said: "I kept chanting in the heart 'our Father which art in heaven, forgive us our sins, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil' I had to be saved from this evil by all means." In this way, Yeonsuk endured the time in Bowibu, but many of my interviewees that suffered interrogation and torture in Bowibu mentioned those who could not survive the torture in Bowibu. Sunok who had lived with the money sent by three children who settled in South Korea also said that she had been insulted in the Bowibu investigation:

"I, Cho Yeonsuk, have the background of my grandfather who had participated in the anti-Japanese movement with Great Leader, Kim Il-sung. Then, for a mere sum of money, do they beat me until I am covered in blood? Homeland or whatever, such insult was unendurable even to a person like me, a communist to the bone. Suffering such insult, nobody may not remain in that land."

After giving all the wealth she had to Bowibu, she was no longer investigated. Suffering at that time made her decide to leave her home and go to South Korea. Filled with fury, she said: "Torture makes people leave North Korea, and it is not only due to 'the physical suffering' but also to the psychological". Psychological suffering made them helpless and sad, but what made them leave was the rage against the system of the country that they believed protected them.

Decision to go to South Korea in order to get back at being abused by the state

Half of my interviewees who experienced the life in Bowibu and Guryujang through enforced repatriation or on other charges made their decision to escape to South Korea in Bowibu. As will be dealt with later, the other half decided to flee to South Korea whilst in labour training camps and re-education camps. There is a big difference between crossing to China and fleeing to South Korea: it is possible for North Koreans to return from China and see their family again, but they can never return from South Korea. The North Korean government

may believe that cruel punishment will prevent repatriates from escaping again, and yet such severe punishment made even those people who tried to live back and forth between China and North Korea determine to escape to South Korea. Miseon, a woman who decided to escape to South Korea, said as follows:

“When I escaped to China, I made up my mind to live in China from then on. Being caught there, however, I was so scared of going to China again. I was afraid of being caught again. Thus, I decided that I’d rather go to South Korea.”

Mira, who had received a 3-year sentence in re-education camp for smuggling, explained:

“Smugglers like us in Haesan know well that South Korea is well off, because we live in the border area. However, I had not thought of going to Korea. Because of our children, I tried to earn money while living in China, send it to my family, and meet my kids going back and forth between China and North Korea escaping the vigilance. If I go to South Korea, I cannot meet my kids; and I cannot bring them all to South Korea either. But, after sitting in Ddong-gan for three months, I decided to run to South Korea, for I thought if I were taken here once again I might not survive.”

The interviewees who were subject to Bowibu investigation and detention on the charge of treason or spying decided to flee to South Korea for fear that the same thing might happen again. However, they had a stronger motivation for going to South Korea. While being tortured, they came to have animosity or revengeful emotions against as well as skepticism about the North Korean regime. Thus, they decided to go to South Korea, which North Korea does not recognize as an independent sovereign state and also regards with hostility. Mijin, who had served in the military for 10 years, but was forcibly discharged due to disease, and was taken to Bowibu after being caught selling Korean movies burnt into CDs, said that she fled to South Korea precisely in order to betray the country:

“I had loyally served my country in the military for 10 years, but when I had a kidney disease and could not urinate, they did not cure the disease and discharged me out of the military. Those who were forcibly discharged cannot even receive their pension. I tried to live by any means, but they caught such a person and beat ruthlessly. That was such an insult to my humanity. I really wanted to shoot them all to death, all of Bowibu agents and executives. Sitting in Ddong-gan, I gnashed my teeth. I wanted to betray my country. That is why

I decided that I should go to South Korea once released from here. Even now, when Kim, Jong-un is on TV, I want to turn it off.”

Founded as one of the communist states from the beginning, North Korea sees the US, the leading state in capitalist societies, as the more obvious and definite enemy than South Korea, and from their childhood North Korean people have been educated into the belief that the US is the archenemy. Accordingly, among 30,000 North Korean escapees, 99 percent of them live in South Korea; with only one percent outside the Korean peninsula 90 percent of among whom are in the UK and Europe based on their anti-American sentiment. Nonetheless, there were interviewees who tried to go to the US to oppose the North Korean regime and take revenge on the North Korean government. One of my interviewees, Yun is preparing to go to the US as she wants to testify against North Korea is by revealing the violation of human rights that she experienced.

In this way, it can be seen that though my interviewees initially chose to move across the border to China to access the means of life rather than to betray their country (for what some would term economic, not political, reasons), the decision to go to South Korea or the US is imagined as a deliberate act of political betrayal to their country, and is a direct response to their suffering at the hands of the regime. In other words, they do not just endure the suffering, but express their reaction to it in their own way. That is, they consider their migration to South Korea or to the US, so-called the enemy countries, as a retaliation for suffering to the great leader of the country, Kim Jong-un. In fact, Kim Jong-un is believed to be much concerned about the destabilisation of the country by an excessive number of ‘escapees’ and has reinforced border surveillance to prevent unauthorised crossings by building fences and installing CCTV.

4.3.3 *Die or Bad: Experiences on camps*

My interviewees who had been caught in China and repatriated were sent from Jibgyulso to labour training camps. The interviewees who had been repatriated multiple times or committed a crime were sent to labour re-education camps. Among my interviewees, three had been in both the training camp and the re-education camp. After being repatriated, they had lived in the training camp for six months; then they were caught again trying to defect and were sent to a re-education camp, where they lived for 2-3 years.

As discussed earlier, travelling abroad without the government’s permission is illegal in North Korea and therefore faces a sentence of between 6 months and one year labour training camp or up to three years re-education camps.

While there are minor differences between re-education camps and training camps, they have much in common. The literal translation of the Korean words of ‘nodong danryundae’ and ‘nodong kyohwaso’ shows us some differences. The former has the focus on training the body and mind through labour, and the latter on re-educating body and mind through labour and thus changing sinners into new human beings who will not sin again. However, what these two types of camps have in common is the ambition to make a person regret the sin through intensive physical labour.

At a practical level, both also have the commonality of confinement and the working environment under which prisoners are forced to labour. Differences are found in the types and time of the imposed labour and the hours of confinement. However, because there are scant books or research on confinement facilities in North Korea, it is hard to know the exact common or different features of the two types of camp. Even the few surveys currently available are not based on field surveys or research such as personal visits to the facilities. Therefore, it is difficult to know how re-education camps or training camps are operated. Moreover, the government of North Korea provides no official document or other sources about the operation of these confinement facilities or camps. Reports from international non-governmental organisations (Han et al., 2015; Hawk; 2003, Human Right Watch 2002; KINU, 2009; Muico, 2007) provide description on re-education camps or labour training camps based on the testimony of North Korean escapees.

Comparing experiences of my interviewees who experienced both of re-education camps and training camps, I can find subtle differences between these two types of camps, but many more commonalities. Thus, I will describe common features first and differences later. My interviewees’ common experience of the two types of camps relates to their own humanity or human dignity. They saw the state as denying their humanity and trampling upon their human rights in camps, they spoke of being reduced to non-human beings by state violence, and felt themselves to be non-human beings. In this regard, they spoke of the condition they believed they deserved as human beings. For example, they said they were not human beings under the severe condition of the camps where they were subject to forced labour, and they could not live as human beings in the condition of starvation. Some said they could not be human beings because they could not eat in ‘human’ ways, and others said they could not maintain their humanity because they were unable to ‘eat.’

In explaining loss of their humanity, they sometimes focused on human ‘biological characteristics’, sometimes on human ‘mental characteristics’ For example, they talked about being unable to help fellow inmates who suffered from hard labour, or to take care of sick

people. Some spoke of being deprived of the heart to help others, and in this sense stripped of their own humanity - becoming non-human beings. What they described as becoming 'non-human beings' took place at a social level, as well as an individual one. Before entering the camp, inmates must surrender their identity cards. Sometimes, an inmate's family is not even notified in the event of their death. My interviewees stated that death in the camps creates no legal or social mark - it is invisible.

4.3.4 *Inhumane confinement condition and labour training camps and re-education Camps*

After the preliminary investigation at the National Security Agency (Bowibu), the returnees who irregularly crossed the border to China receive their punishment in the People's Safety Agency for about a month. Some may be subject to further investigation while others have final verdicts, but in both cases they are sent to labour prison camps for forced labour. As a matter of fact, however, forced labour by suspects, i.e. without a final verdict, is against North Korea's domestic law, called North Korea's Regulation on the Administration of Detention Chamber (OHCHR, 2014:21). This is an example of the fact that the North Korean government does not always follow its own constitution and thus the country operates as a totalitarian state.

Hawk's description of North Korea's prison is known to be well-established based on the statements of the prisoners of the re-education camps. In 2015, there believed to be 15-20 re-education camps in North Korea each of which ran its own factories divided into different sectors depending on the region: cement factory, coal mine, glass factory, woodwork factory, brick factory, shoe factory, cloth factory, foundation factory, and farm and so on. The prison is surrounded by very high concrete walls that make escape difficult, and prisoners are forced to work in the factory, properly set up with air-conditioning. They eat about 300 grams of food a day and have to wear uniform. Even their hair styles are strict - very short for females and bold for males. In mid-2010, the number of prisoners in each centre was said to range from three 300 to 4,000. They have to work the hours regardless of the individual's physical condition (even when sick or injured), otherwise they are either tortured or confined to so small a space that one cannot stand, sit or lie properly. After a day's work, they join a speech to honour the Kim family and reflect on their day (Muico, 2007:24; Hawk, 2015:35).

4.3.5 *Forced labour as a punishment*

One of my interviewees, Chul-soo, who spent one year in the labour training camp noted that:

“There is a huge sign at the camp wall saying ‘Those who do not work, do not eat’. I was forced to work from around 5 am to 10 pm at summer and from 7 am to 6-7 pm at winter. I would not say there is a fixed time table but simply can say that our prisoners had to work from it got light until it got dark. After working, there was no rest at all. From that time, all prisoners got together to be educated.”

Most my interviewees who were former prisoners in the labour camps were forced to work for very long hours such as 12-14 hours with no rest time. They mentioned that there was no fixed working time but the sunlight is a criterion to go to work. In this regard, they commonly said: “When the sun goes up, we go to work. When the sun goes down, we stop working”. They worked much longer in summer than winter because the sunlight is essential for working due to a lack of electricity. It is also mentioned that prisoners at the labour training camp work longer hours than other prison camps, primarily for reform and re-education as they work off their crime through the punishment of labour (Muico, 2007:24). The prisoners in the labour re-education camp also have much longer period of imprisonment.

The types of work that the prisoners are allocated to do have been described differently in the reports from international NGOs (Hawk, 2015; Muico, 2007). As I have synthesized the information from these materials and my interview data, there are roughly five types of works in the labour camps: construction, farming, coal mine, factory work (for example, producing clothes, bag, shoes) and works that the local governments required. There does not appear to be a marked division of labour based on gender and age, but female prisoners in the labour re-education camps tend to work at the factories.

My interviewees experienced all the five types of work. Those who worked the labour training camp usually worked for the big construction such as building bridges or establishing buildings, and paving roads, or they carried logs or other materials for foundation work.

The life with long hours of harsh labour and cruel punishment in training camps and re-education camps was called ‘Jong sal-ee’ by my interviewees. Because ‘jong’ can be translated into ‘a slave’ or ‘a slave servant,’ ‘Jong sal-ee’ can be translated into ‘serving as a slave servant’ or ‘used as a slave’ in English. Whenever they mentioned their life in camps as ‘Jong sal-ee,’ I asked why they thought that way. Chang-ran, a woman who had spent 15 years at the re-education camp, explained as follows:

“We had to do whatever was ordered. That is why I call it Jong sal-ee. In re-education camps, there is no such thing as what I like or not. Without any

thought we just do whatever they order us to do. Isn't that what a slave means? What else can it be?"

Similarly, Hak-dong, who spent one year in the labour training camp stated:

"In a word, we are slaves. Slaves they can shove around. Like cows, we are dragged around. If they drag us, we are dragged. They beat us if we do not work hard. Being beaten to death, we cannot utter a word."

Hak-dong used the expression of a 'cow' when talking about 'being like a slave.' In Korea, which had long been an agricultural country, a 'cow' is a cultural symbol. In Korea, there is a saying 'work like a cow,' which means doing a hard work for a very long time. As in the symbolic meaning of a 'cow,' long hours of labour make prisoners lose humanity and feel themselves like animals.

4.3.6 *Hunger: malnutrition to death*

In re-education camps and in labour training camps, two times of meal were provided daily: each meal contains 100 to 150 grams of ground corn powder and a soup cooked with outer layers of cabbage, the part people do not usually eat, dried radish greens, and salt, and the total amount of these food is less than one third of the regular ration an ordinary North Korean receives. What appears consistent in my interviewees' accounts is that prisoners are always starving, and some re-education camps provide only one meal because of less time of labour than in labour training camps. Half my interviewees did not have family visits to bring them food and suffered from starvation.

Having described themselves as 'slaves' or 'animals' because of the lack of autonomy and the cruel punishments, my interviewees use again the same expressions in their portrayal of starvation in the camps. Previously, when Chang-ran described her life in the re-education camp as 'slavery', Jin-suk, who had introduced Chang-ran and accompanied her in the first interview, refuted her expression of slavery:

"Sister, how can you call that slavery? In the training camp, we are not even slaves. Slaves can get food from their masters because they are the masters' property and should not die. However, our case was different. They forced us to work like slaves without giving food."

In order to survive starvation, Jin-suk removes her humanity from herself.

“In the beginning, I was so hungry and there was nothing I could do about it. My family did not visit me, and I was about to die because I felt so dizzy due to hunger. Because I was in the farm work team, I ate daikons and potatoes escaping the vigilance of supervisors. Then, I was caught and locked up alone in a cell, where I only breathed without eating anything for one week. Being released, I thought I should not be caught again, and thus I caught grasshoppers, frogs, and other every insect in sight when weeding a field, carried those in my breast, and put them into soup later when I had a meal, because that was how I could survive. If I am told to eat them now, of course I cannot because they are so disgusting to me now. Yet, at that time, I had to eat them in order to survive. Really, I was not a human. I chewed even a finger-sized living frog.”

Interviewees who worked in the construction team or factories say that Jin-suk’s case is a lucky one, because she could eat insects and frogs while working in the farm work team. Especially, in the re-education camps, no visit was allowed, and they had to eat only what they were given, and most of them suffered from malnutrition. Some interviewees compare themselves with the ordinary human beings who eat normal meals and reduced themselves to a being less than a human: “I hope to eat like a human being”. Recognizing having a meal as one of the basic rights that all human beings deserve, Yeon-suk described prisoners as animals because in re-education camps prisoners are not given meals:

“Inevitably, most prisoners in the re-education camp suffer from malnutrition because there is nothing to eat. Women have no buttocks. We do not know when and where urine flows out. Without our own excitation, urine goes out by itself. Buttocks are all gone. Because our bodies are so weak, we have no power and no energy even to move our legs. We just stand with sunken eyes. We are treated as animals, not as human beings. If they think we are human, they should give us at least two meals.”

While Yeon-suk compared herself with those who have proper meals and identified herself with an animal, some other interviewees talked about themselves as beings ‘less than animals.’ One of those interviewees, Jin-suk, who had served three years in the re-education camp for smuggling, described her position as a being less than a pig:

“It is like being less than an animal. In the re-education camp, dogs eat beans and corns, but humans cannot. If humans steal and eat corns or beans, they cannot shorten the prison term, and they are hit, beaten and locked up

alone in a cell. When pigs are sick, they are so well fed and their skin becomes glossy for the lack of hair. When pigs are sick, they get Ringer's solution, but when humans are sick, they get no Ringer's solution, being just left for dead."

As stated above, by focusing on what and how they eat, the interviewees who experienced starvation in re-education camps and labour training camps talk about themselves as beings deprived of humanity and beings who eat what human beings cannot eat. Also, by focusing on how much they eat, they create the category of 'an inferior being' who eats less than human beings or even less than animals, and they describe themselves as animals because they eat so little, and also as inferior beings who actually eat less than the animals living in re-education camps.

4.3.7 *Somewhere between death and live: living corpses*

Due to continued malnutrition, many prisoners in re-education camps and labour training camps meet their death. Death in these camps occurs in the following cases: execution as a punishment, injury from labour, starvation, or sickness resulting from malnutrition. However, prisoners dying from starvation are much greater in numbers than those dying from the former two reasons. Hak-dong witnessed the death of his inmates due to malnutrition.

It is true that without family visit, most people die. It is not that they die after going without food just a couple of days. It is after several weeks or months of starvation that they die. There are stages in malnutrition. In training camps, if they are in around the fourth stage, there is no chance for them to survive. Once anus becomes widened, they cannot live. Lying down, they urinate and defecate, and from sweat pores there flows out ooze. All the pores won't close. Besides, the smell is unspeakable. Even with only one person in that state, it so horribly stinks of the smell, and nobody approaches the person.

Hak-dong gave food to a man who had become his close friend. He was discovered, charged, and for this crime was beaten and put in solitary confinement. Taking care of dying inmates is said to be a sin. Some interviewees talked about this, and the story of Sung-ran, who spent one year in the training camp, is a good example:

"To the living corpses whose anuses are already open and who have loose bowels, no one should try to save their life or give them food. We shouldn't talk to the living corpses or take the posture of giving help to them. Otherwise, we are directly put in solitary confinement. That is why in a cell we lay the living corpses on the corner and cover them with blankets. Until they do not move at all, nobody goes near them."

Those who were dying of malnutrition were referred to as ‘the living corpse,’ or ‘the living dead’ who are neither living nor dead. As in English, in Korean, this expression is an oxymoron that combines two incompatible words. ‘Corpse’ refers to a dead body, and thus using ‘living’ as a modifier of a dead body is contradictory. In the cultural context of Korea, ‘the living corpse’ means ghosts or apparitions who have physical forms but without human mind.

Paraphrasing it into cultural terms, we can call this ‘undead’ or ‘zombie,’ but its literal translation is ‘the living dead’ as is shown here. Because the literal translation fits interviewees’ statement and description more, this dissertation will use ‘the living dead’ from now on. As Yeon-suk said, for fear of punishment, people do not help the living dead who are dying of malnutrition and jailors of re-education camps or training camps take no measures until they die. Thus, my interviewees consistently refer to them as ‘the disposable beings’: “We are beings who ought to be abandoned, because we die deservedly. How on earth can there be such beings? Then, there they are”.

Because the living dead cannot be disposed of yet, they are dangerous beings in training camps and re-education camps. Seeing ‘the living dead,’ many prisoners think they themselves can be the living dead in future and attempt to escape from the camp or take collective objections. Thus, it was said that some re-education camps or training camps kept the living dead in isolation. Especially since many people died of malnutrition, a test for finding malnutrition was conducted, according to the statement of the people who went to the camps after 2010. Ryeonju, who spent 15 years in the re-education camp, said as follows:

“First, we take off all the clothes and then bend our waists forward. Then, you can see the buttohole. By the size of that, they judge whether we die or not. If the hole is bigger than the size of a 500-won coin, the person is isolated right away.”

There are few people among my interviewees who know where those isolated prisoners go and how they are dealt with. However, they stated that the isolated prisoners must have died and their dead bodies would have been disposed of in a humiliating way. Some of my interviewees said that they had worked in a place where corpses were disposed of at training camps and re-education camps, although they did not see the living dead after the death.

My interviewees say dying of starvation or disease at re-education camps or training camps is ‘to die in vain.’ Even dead dogs were not treated this way, said my interviewees who had served in training camps. Saying this, they revealed their indignation and horror about the way death of prisoners was dealt with. Apart from the way of dealing with death,

what made them even angrier was that the death of prisoners was not notified to their family. Even if prisoners die, their families cannot visit. They are not notified and even after their death there is no way for the family to find out about the death. It is said that in training camps where family visits are allowed, the family can go and find out that the prisoner died (although they cannot see the body), but in re-education camps, the family can only guess the prisoner's death if he or she does not come back. Dying like this is not a human way of dying, say my interviewees. It is because this is not a normal way of dying: for example, my interviewees complained that there is no funeral; what is worse is that even the fact of their death disappears. To them, what defines 'a human' is not only how they die but also how their death is dealt with after death.

4.3.8 *Torture, sexual violence, and punishment*

As such, death is close to these prisoners. They die not only of malnutrition but also of torture and punishment, as was discussed before. The death due to torture and punishment occurs much less frequently than that due to malnutrition. However, there is no set rule or criterion for the punishment. Here, I found some types of punishment my interviewees mentioned. In this section, I will describe punishment in re-education camps and training camps by levels: from the most common one and what prisoners mention as the lightest one to the most severe - one so serious that my interviewees only witnessed and did not actually suffer.

Physical punishment: Being put in solitary confinement and violence (being beaten)

Being locked up in a solitary cell and being beaten are very common punishments. Solitary confinement is a punishment in itself, because there is a very little, if any, food, and it is cold in the cell with a horrible hygienic conditions. Chang-ran, who had spent 15 years in the re-education camp, talked about 'solitary confinement punishment' as follows:

"I had been put in solitary confinement more than ten times. Well.. I had lived there for 15 years anyway. Usually we spent a week at a time in a solitary cell. They put us there for nothing; we were taken to the cell when we lost favour with a jailor. I was put there because I chatted with my inmates next to me after lights-out for sleep, or because I ate slowly. If we behave just as we do, then we are held in solitary confinement. Then, taken there, for one week, we stay in a place with no sunlight and no place to lie down on. unless we stretch our legs to

the dung-tub in which we cannot even lie down. Locked up there for one week, mentally deprived, we even lose our appetite; of course there is not enough meal to eat. I came to lose my will to live.”

Apparently, being located in isolation, hunger and unhygienic conditions is the punishment given to the individual prisoner. However, this punishment is for the government’s control of other prisoners rather than for re-education and punishment of individuals. Whether in training camps or in re-education camps, the interviewees without experience of the solitary confinement had more fear of the punishment than those who had been there. Those without the experience watched and disciplined themselves in order not to be locked up there.

Since the punishment of ‘beating’ was already dealt with in the previous section of the forced labour, this section will discuss only what was spoken in common, without quoting interviews. In beating prisoners, various levels of physical violence were used such as kicking one in the shins, striking one in the body parts with guns, slapping one’s face, giving the cane, etc. Jailors used to say violence was used for ‘educating’ prisoners, and violence is the most commonly used punishment during the time of labour. My interviewees did not even feel that such violence was punishment, and when I directly asked “what kind of punishment did you get?” they did not talk about their experience of being beaten. To them, violence became such an everyday routine that it was just a part of the ‘hard’ experiences at re-education camps or training camps and not a punishment. However, according to my analysis, the interviewees who got the punishment of physical violence during labour hours say “body performed its work automatically for fear of being beaten again.” For example, Miseon, who carried logs in the training camp, could not lift logs in the beginning because they were too heavy, but after getting a couple of blows, she could lift them up easily and automatically when a jailor approached near her with a square bar. In this way, in the training camp, prisoners were made into the disciplined bodies by violence.

‘Filthiness’ and ‘unhygienic conditions’ were dealt with in the previous Bowibu section, and they appear again as a punishment in training camps and re-education camps. My interviewees talked about so-called a poop penalty, as seen in the Bowibu section. Since this is mentioned before, I will describe simply, here. Kyung-sin, who served one year at the training camp, received a ‘poop penalty’:

“One day, feeling so hungry, I uprooted cabbage in the cabbage field and munched on it escaping the vigilance. Unluckily, only I was discovered, while others were not. The foreman gave a ‘poop penalty’: a ‘poop penalty’ is to bring poop in a bucket and pour it over the head. Until the next day when I took

a shower, I wiped off only my face with saliva. So smelly, I kept feeling like vomiting.”

Like other interviewees who got the ‘poop penalty’ at Bowibu, Kyung-sin was punished at the training camp with filthiness of poop and abjectness imposed on ‘poop’ in its social and cultural terms.

Sexual harassment and sexual molestation are also very common, so in this section, I will write about the rarer case, rape. Two types of rape were reported by my interviewees. First, rape was used to set ‘an example’ to other prisoners, and a means by which jailors could demonstrate their own power. Su-yeon was raped at the training camp:

“I asked for more food because that day was one of my inmates’ birthday. Then, the jailor said that there was no birthday for the sinner like you who was taken to the training camp. Saying that there was a way to deal with a bitch like me and he was going to give an example, he ripped off my clothes in front of other prisoners and pinned me down. Then, jailors raped me in turn, back and forth. I could not even feel pain, because it was so shameful. I just wanted to die.”

After Su-yeon got the punishment of rape, other prisoners demanded nothing from jailors and spoke nothing about personal matters. Jailors at the training camp ‘disciplined’ prisoners this way. Second, the jailors raped female prisoners for sexual pleasure. In-suk had been caught in China and repatriated. She was sent to the labour training camp, where she did farming. Given only one meal a day, she felt so hungry. The chief leader of the training camp asked her to have sex with him, which she refused. Kept in a solitary cell without a meal given, she was so hungry. Thus, after a week she agreed to sleep with him. She would rather just give away the body which was to decay after death, she thought. It seemed better to her to give her body once than starving to death.

4.3.9 *Trial by the people, public execution*

According to interviewees, what the North Korean authorities are most worried about in relation to the operation of training camps and re-education camps is the collapse of the camp system. It is said that such collapse could occur as a result of prisoners’ collective demonstration or their escape. Those who attempt to escape from the camp are considered to challenge the camp system as a whole, and they are forced to confess the sin they committed

in front of all prisoners and tried and judged in the people's court so that they are seen to receive the punishment they deserve.

Prisoners who are not shot and killed during an unsuccessful escape are tried in the people's court and publicly executed. Among my interviewees, two witnessed a public execution. Their statements are similar. The following is from Yun, who was in the training camp in 2008:

“There was a building used for education called Gobong-hoegwan behind the training camp. Suddenly, although it was not even the time for education, we were told to gather. There, we were told that there were traitors who betrayed us and tried to escape and they would be punished in the name of the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il. Two were tied to a tree with their hands behind. Then, seven or eight soldiers took the posture of shooting. Before shooting, a chief officer said, ‘See, your attempt to escape leads to your self-destruction.’ Then, they shot with the ‘bang’ of a gunshot. I could not see them being shot. I was so startled that my eyes were closed automatically at the moment of shooting.”

Since the late 2000s, there has been no public execution in North Korea according to the official media of North Korea, and North Korean escapees who came to South Korea after this date have also stated that a public execution is now a thing of the past (Han et al., 2015). However, execution can be carried out different ways. Execution by firing squad that takes a person's life immediately may have ended, but extreme punishments such as taking away or cutting body parts, which results in loss of life, have not necessarily ended. The government of North Korea may have put on a facade of not violating human life by ending executions, but it also invented another type of execution. Kyung-suk, who had lived in the re-education camp for three years until 2009, witnessed one of such extreme punishments: pulling out eyeballs:

“There were men who were caught escaping for hunger. We all gathered, and my number was 1580. This number, so long. In the gathering of almost 2000 people, they pulled out eyeballs of those guys. Where in the world do people kill others alive by pulling out their eyeballs? They did this in order to give a lesson that we all ended up being like that if we tried to escape. When eyeballs were pulled out, the blood vessels came out from behind the eyes and hung below the neck. There was a boy taken there with his mom. His mother fainted when she

saw the eyeballs of her son being pulled out, and she died without coming to. The son was taken to somewhere, and nobody knew what happened to him next.”

Because Kyung-suk’s story was so horrendous and violent, listening to her story in the interview I wondered if it was true. However, just because it is unimaginable to me does not mean it did not happen. So, I asked other interviewees about Kyung-suk’s story. More than half of them said it was a lie, and the other half said it could happen. Interviewees who said it was a lie gave a rather strange answer in common, namely that part of Kyung-suk’s story that was a lie was not the description of the extreme punishment but the claim that there had been an attempt to escape from the camp: according to them, escaping from the camp is impossible. Jung-su, who served five years in the re-education camp on the charge of trying to defect to South Korea, said that an escape from the camp is impossible due to the tight surveillance:

“We are all kept under constant surveillance. So, even with the opportunity to escape, we cannot not even try for fear of being caught. If someone seems to have escaped, all should not go out of the cell and sit there until that person’s whereabouts is found out. Wherever they run away from the camp, all of them are caught in 24 hours. Re-education camp is surrounded by iron gates, all around like front, back, and sides. Nobody can jump over the gates. Stories about escaping re-education camps are all lies.”

However, Jung-su talked about the possibility of escaping = training camps, Jibgyulso, and Bowibu, whose buildings are not as solid as those of re-education camps. Among my interviewees, only two escaped from training camps and both are male. Being repatriated from China, Cheol-jin was sent to the training camp, escaped after one month in 2012, and came to South Korea in 2013 through China and Thailand.

“We stand a good chance of escaping. I worked as a logger who cut down trees in a mountain. After around a month, I could figure out when jailors were out. I could see the routine of when they took turns and where they were. That day was perhaps somebody’s birthday or a holiday. Thus, I made up my mind in the morning of that day: ‘today is the only chance, and I should escape if there is no jailor.’ On that day, jailors left work early. Also, the foreman was given the whole job of supervising. When it was getting dark in the evening, he told us to pack and go down the mountain, because it was evening time then, and jailors went

down the mountain among themselves. I spoke loudly that I would follow them soon. Pretending to following them, I ran away, crossed the mountain, and went to another mountain. For three days and nights, without stopping, I kept going and arrived at my girlfriend's house in Hamgyeongbuk-do, Cheong-jin. Staying there for a short time, I asked her to connect me to a phone-broker, contacted the smuggler in the border, and went to China on that day."

It is said that after three days, soldiers suddenly invaded his girlfriend's house, and she was executed for helping Cheol-jin and her family were sent to the re-education camp. Because Cheol-jin's brother worked as a smuggler and broker, Cheol-jin could quickly hire a smuggler and escape into China right after escaping the training camp. He said the reason why he escaped from North Korea again was that he escaped from the training camp.

Like Cheol-jin, Jeong-ho who was repatriated twice and sent to the training camp twice, escaped when the surveillance was loosened. Jeong-ho said he could escape from the training camp because he had been in the same training camp and knew well about it. With two other colleagues, he got permission to go to the toilet in the middle of the night, and expecting he would be told to poop in the reeds because the toilet was far away, he went deep into the field of reeds and escaped. Anticipating being caught, he did not go to the river through which many people crossed the Chinese border. Instead, he took a longer route, so that it took him one month to escape from North Korea. As in Cheol-jin's case, Jeong-ho also mentioned that he came to South Korea because he escaped from the training camp.

Once escaping from the training camp, we had to come to South Korea by any means. Being caught in North Korea, we would right away be executed by a firing squad, and if we were caught in China we were sent to the political prisoner camp or brutally tortured and then executed. Wherever we are caught, we die. That is why going to South Korea is the only way to survive.

Interviewees who did not believe the story of escaping from the camp and coming to South Korea as in Jeong-ho's case said as follows. Following is the story of Jeong-suk who had lived in the training camp for one year.

"However long it takes, escapees keep being tracked down until they are caught. I saw two who were caught in five years, and they were starved to death. A woman was caught after seven years and sent to the camp again. In such a case, she cannot survive. I do not believe that someone escaped from the training camp and came to South Korea. I think that is a lie."

Those interviewees who thought it impossible to escape from training camps or re-education camps also mentioned the reasons: not only the surveillance or a dead end that confines the prisoners' bodies but also the re-education imposed upon the prisoners' mind and brain. For fear that prisoners might escape again, the government of North Korea educates again the prisoners in re-education camps and training camps with the propaganda that says North Korea has the most democratic political system. The government also educates prisoners to believe that China is bad, lest more prisoners should escape to China.

4.3.10 *Social 'stigma'*

However, not all of my interviewees decided to defect to South Korea following their experience of human rights violation in the camps. Unlike Cheol-jin and Jeong-ho, some interviewees decided to escape from North Korea because of the social discrimination they experienced after being released from the training camp or the re-education camp, which is a 'social stigma'. Chang-ran who had served in re-education camp for 15 years, stated that her life after release from the re-education camp became difficult:

“Coming back home, I was expelled from my house because I was labeled the re-education convict. My family said ‘Don’t give a hard time to your family because of you.’ I had no place to put my ass in. Thus, I decided to cross the border, for I could not live there.”

Those who had served the sentence in training camps for illegal border crossing agreed that monitoring became more severe and it made their life more difficult. However, they put more emphasis on a 'stigma' than on monitoring, saying “the worst person in North Korea is a murderer, the next a rapist, and then a border-crosser like us.” They said in common that they were stigmatized as 'a traitor'.

Those who had served in the re-education camp for trying to escape to South Korea said 'the stigma of South Korea' was attached to them. Currently in North Korea, the guilt-by-association system is still practiced, so family members of those labelled or stigmatized as a traitor are at disadvantage such as a forcible discharge from the army or a dismissal from a job. Or, if these family members are suspected of being involved in the act of treachery or participating in the crossing of the Chinese border, they too can be sent to training camps. Two of my interviewees who found it difficult to live in North Korea due to the stigma of a traitor said they thought about suicide. In-suk who had decided to commit suicide, said as follows:

“I could not live anymore. People in my village pointed their accusing fingers at me, blaming me as a traitor who escaped to China and betrayed the country. Parents and siblings also told me not to pretend to know them, because I was such a stupid sod! Having no job place, I could not go home either. What else could I do? I thought dying was the only way. Killing myself, all was over, I thought.”

However, Jin-suk, who had two children, was afraid of the children’s suffering due to her suicide. She therefore gave up her plan of committing suicide and decided again to escape from North Korea. Suicide is illegal in North Korea. It is impossible to flee from the system even with death.

4.3.11 *Re-escape: in order to betray the regime and not to be caught*

For most interviewees, however, escape to South Korea was a strategy by which to take revenge on the government of North Korea: since their human rights were trampled upon in training camps and re-education camps, they wanted to betray their country. They chose South Korea not least because it is the country against which North Korea harbours the worst enmity. In the words of Hak-dong:

“You know, I worked for the Communist Party as a formal member, but being sent to the training camp even a person like me came to feel cheated, that is... I felt betrayed. So, it was easy to betray the country because it betrayed me first. Thus, I wanted to go to South Korea and show off my betrayal.”

Even without thought of escaping from training camps and re-education camps, some interviewees chose to go to South Korea because they were afraid of being caught again in China. Yun-jeong who married into a man in the rural China and was caught there, stated as follows.

“A friend I came to know in the training camp days was in Yeon-gil and told me that I could go to South Korea. At that time, there were a lot of rumours that trying to escape to South Korea, people were caught and sent to North Korea. People like me who live hiding in the rural China have less information. Rather, those caught and sent to the prison of North Korea became more knowledgeable, because all the people there were captured and brought there. In China, I did not know the people around me and could not trust them. However, I could trust this friend, who had lived in the prison of North Korea.”

Sung-ran, who was repatriated like Yun-jeong, said as follows: In the prison of North Korea, people said there were very many ways to go to South Korea. I was told a lot that going to South Korea is the only way to live. In China I never heard this, though. Thus, I decided to go to South Korea, because if going to China again, I might be caught again.

To summarize, interviewees who experienced training camps and re-education camps had originally escaped to China because of hunger, political repression, or for the unification of family as stated in the previous session. However, after experiencing repatriation and the life in the camps, they came to fear that they might lose their humanity and again suffer horribly if they are caught again in China and sent to the camps in North Korea. They therefore planned to escape to South Korea, not to China.

This basic reason for escape - dehumanization - was sharpened by four further factors. First, their experience of violations of human rights in prison made them critical of the North Korean regime, sometimes wishing to escape in order to take revenge on this regime. Second, they fled to South Korea in order to avoid punishment for escaping from a prison. Third, they could try to escape again because of the information that made possible their escape go to South Korea: the information they got in training camps, including sometimes contacts with smugglers or brokers, and/or knowledge of the fact that citizenship would be available to them once they entered South Korea. The last contributing factor was the stigmatization of those who had crossed the Chinese border as traitors. It was hard to live a life in North Korea with this social stigma, and this also prompted some of my interviewees to make the attempt to escape to South Korea. The timing of their re-escaping varied, but most of them escaped again within three to six months. For the one who re-escaped earliest, it took three days, and for those who re-escaped latest, it took two years. The reason for this time gap depended on their access to smugglers.

4.4 *Conclusion*

This chapter has documented the suffering experienced by my research participants in North Korea. It has outlined the human cost of the great famine in 1990s, both as regards the loss of life and life-long physical disabilities it gave rise to, and its psychological costs for individuals affected. The overwhelming desire for food drove my interviewees to consume inedible and indigestible substances, such as soil and the bark of trees, which not only intensified rather than relieved their bodily suffering but also added to their psychological agony. Starvation was experienced as dehumanizing, the reduction of a person to but a body. Interviewees who survived this period lost a sense of their own dignity and worth, and witnessed the collapse

of their community as they lost parents, children, friends and neighbours. The political propaganda of the North Korean regime that taught ‘Despite poverty, my country is still the best and the great leader protects me’, which had previously dominated their minds, began to lose its hold as physical suffering and the fear of death overtook it. They experienced a sense of profound betrayal by Kim Jong-un. Their personal and community loss was compounded by the loss of the great father of the people, who had failed to fulfil his duties as father and driven his people to starvation. In other words, their relentless suffering led to a conscious reflection on their regime and unauthorised movement, previously considered to be a betrayal of, even treasonous to, their country and their great leader, suddenly became conscionable. Severe physical and psychological suffering caused the fear of death and the desire for survival to rise to the fore, and my interviewees eventually made their move to China seeking relief from their suffering.

For many of my interviewees, however, this effort to escape suffering ultimately only added to it. Repatriated and imprisoned in the camps, they experienced various forms of violence such as forced labour, torture, sexual abuse and forced abortion. Where those who had gone to China at an early stage of the famine had often done so only temporarily, in search of release from the pain of hunger, the experience of suffering at the camps had a tendency to transform their perception of the country and the regime and provoke a desire for more permanent escape. Many of my interviewees understood that they would continue to be vulnerable to repeated episodes of the horrific suffering at the camps unless they managed to secure refugee status or a citizenship in a state other than China. Gradually my North Korean interviewees came to relate their suffering to the social structures and characteristics of the political regime. According to Auyero and Debora (2009), people in poor villages find the causes for their poverty in environmental factors, which they address and conceptualise as environmental abuse. Similarly, my interviewees now identified the link between their suffering (both from hunger and in the camps) and the dictatorial North Korean regime, and began to conceptualise their experience as political abuse.

Suffering has recently become a focus of sociological research and theorizing (Wilkinson and Kleinman, 2016), with the experience of people suffering from poverty, and the social embodiment of poverty, receiving particular attention (Sherman, 2009; Wilson, 2009). In the sociological literature on human rights, suffering and its effects have also received some attention, and yet the sociological study of suffering remains marginal (Harvey, 2012; 517-8). This chapter draws attention to the connection between suffering and human mobility. Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to bring the literature on migration into close

dialogue with the sociological literature on suffering, the data on the lived experience of suffering presented in this chapter is crucial to understanding the central empirical, conceptual and theoretical concerns of the thesis. In particular, it highlights the following three themes.

First, grasping the enormity my interviewees' suffering in North Korea necessarily calls into question the conceptual binaries used to categorise migration in the contemporary world. How can the voluntary/forced or economic/political dichotomies that are used to sort migrants into different groupings help us to make sense of the cross-border movement of a woman like Mi-Jung, for example, for whom remaining in her place of origin meant feeding her children soil to assuage the pain of their hunger, and then digging that soil out of their rectums?

Second, the data presented in this chapter focuses attention on temporal dimensions of both suffering and migration. My interviewees did not experience one-off, or instantaneous traumas, but were rather subjected to long, drawn out processes of starvation, pain and loss. In the camps too, the horror was continuous over long periods of time, and its temporal indeterminacy, the not-knowing how long it would continue, was part of the torture. The motivation for my interviewees' mobility was not fixed and certain throughout but has to be understood as shifting in relation to the passage of time and its effects on them physically and psychologically. All my interviewees started their lives in North Korea, and were in South Korea at the time I interviewed them, but they did not arrive there by taking a straightforward, linear journey from A to B. The life narratives that ultimately led to their presence in South Korea are as much, if not more, stories about confinement and immobility as about escape and movement.

Third, attending to the enormity of the suffering experienced by my interviewees in North Korea highlights the need for more nuanced understandings of human agency and its relation to mobility. In much of the academic literature on migration, as well as in policy thinking on the lines between smuggling and trafficking, and asylum-seeking and labour migration, there is a tendency to imagine human movement as either voluntary or not. And yet as David Turton (2003:11) has pointed out, strictly speaking, 'An act is involuntary when it is done without thinking, without deliberation, as when I let out a cry of pain after dropping something on my foot'. My interviewees did describe themselves as having acted almost involuntarily in response to some of the circumstances they faced - they spoke of the pain of hunger driving them to act in ways they would not otherwise have chosen to act, for example. But it is important to note both that they speak of this with shame, with a sense that they became less than human when they acted in involuntary ways, and that they do

not, on the whole, cast their decisions to cross the border into China in search of the means of life, or to flee to South Korea, as involuntary.

There is a difference between agency and autonomy. Clearly, my interviewees were not autonomous beings capable of authoring their own fates when they were starving or imprisoned in North Korea. But even in the most unimaginably horrible circumstances, they struggled to retain agency in the sense of retaining their own will to act, as illustrated by the acts of refusal they describe (refusal to say what their torturers demanded they admit, refusal to keep their eyes open when commanded to watch the torture or murder of others, etc.). In this respect, the action of those who decided to escape to South Korea following their imprisonment and torture could be described as very much a voluntary action, an act of defiance, even though it can equally be described as forced by circumstances.

Listening to the voices of my interviewees teaches us, among other things, about the value they attach to being human, for above all, they were preoccupied and haunted by the dehumanizing aspects of the starvation, imprisonment and torture that they had experienced. As possessing will, or agency, is regarded as one of the key features of being human, it is important to find a way of telling the story of their mobility that acknowledges and respects their agency. In the chapters that follow, I seek to both reveal the extraordinarily oppressive structures and forces that constrained the choices of my interviewees and the extreme violence that many of them faced, and to show how they responded, as human agents, to these circumstances. I therefore work with a model of “agency as the capacity to act - differential, context specific, and always, in some fashion extant” (Shah, 2014:199).

5. IRREGULAR BORDER CROSSING TO CHINA: TRAFFICKING OR SMUGGLING?

5.1 Introduction

Human trafficking is often described by journalists, politicians and NGOs as a ‘form of modern-day slavery’.¹ It is claimed to be the second-largest global criminal industry, estimated to be worth 32 billion dollars, and 12.3 million people are said to be currently trafficked for exploitation (UNODC, 2009). In 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime and, with it, new protocols on human trafficking and smuggling migrants. The Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air is concerned with the illegal border entry that smuggled migrants consent to, as well as the informed receipt of a material good by a smuggler. This Protocol aims to secure states parties’ cooperation to combat and prevent the smuggling of migrants.

The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime defines trafficking as (UN, 2000):

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

¹ Some of the contents in this chapter has been extracted from my published work “*I Want to Be Trafficked so I Can Migrate!*”: Cross-Border Movement of North Koreans into China through Brokerage and Smuggling Networks (Kook, K, 2018) in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 676, 1, p.114–134, and been modified and edited to be better integrated into the current thesis - in particular, for §5.1, §5.2, §5.4.1 and §5.5.

National governments have established various national and regional policies, laws and initiatives based on the UN protocol with the new idea of trafficking expressed by the treaty (Kempadoo et al., 2005:14), which makes it more significant than national laws.

The trafficking protocol mandates the criminalisation of trafficking, strengthening of border controls and ensuring more secure travel and identity documents (Jordan, 2002:9-10). Trafficking is thus ‘framed in international law both as a subset of illegal migration, and as a phenomenon distinct from smuggling’, as O’Connell Davidson (2013:3) points out. Both smuggling and trafficking are regarded as illicit activities that infringe on the nation’s sovereignty as regards the control of its borders and the state’s right to determine who is to be admitted onto its territory (Anderson and O’Connell Davidson, 2003). Accordingly, state parties are required to criminalise the relevant conduct of traffickers and smugglers as well as to cooperate with other states to reinforce international prevention and punishment of these activities. The two protocols have more in common. Both protocols stipulate that the migrants themselves should not be subject to criminal prosecution because of their illegal entry. Next, states are required to concretely address the causes of vulnerability to trafficking and smuggling, albeit not to enforce any particular immigration benefits or procedures for victims, and they are called upon to regularise or expand lawful access to their territory (Bhabha, 2005:3). And yet both protocols prioritise strengthening border controls to ensure national security and combat transnational organised criminal activities (Lobasz, 2009).

Despite the shared obligations of states parties under both protocols, ‘trafficking’ has still been considered as quite distinct from ‘smuggling’, with two main sets of differences being emphasised by states. The first distinction between smuggling and trafficking is temporal (O’Connell Davison, 2013:3). ‘Smuggled persons are generally left to make their own way after crossing the border’, while a ‘trafficking syndicate may arrange for a ‘minder’ to travel with the victims and transfer them to their housing or employment upon arrival at the destination’ (Australian Government AIC, 2008:2). In other words, while both smuggling and trafficking involve illegally crossing a border, the subsequent fate of the individuals affected divides them into two groups: smuggled ‘migrants’ and ‘victims’ of trafficking.

In reality, however, this distinction does not capture the complex situations that migrants face during illegal border crossings. The journeys of smuggled migrants often include a number of departures and multiple states. In general, smuggled migrants are left to make their own way after crossing the border and experience a variety of circumstances. In some cases, they are smuggled into one country, and then from there trafficked to another such that an individual can be a smuggled migrant in one country one day and a victim of trafficking in

another country the next (Bhabha, 2005:3).

Another distinction between smuggling and trafficking is that smuggling is assumed to involve acting ‘voluntarily’ to illegally enter a country, whereas trafficking occurs ‘by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion or of fraud and/or, or deception for the purpose of exploitation’ under the trafficking protocol (Gallagher, 2002:26). This ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ dichotomy is (re)framed by other sets of binary distinctions: between victims and agents, and between innocence and guilt. Those sets of distinctions influence contemporary public policies of states by producing two distinct groups of migrants: ‘victims of trafficking’ and ‘smuggled migrants’. The former are imagined as having been forced to cross the border illegally, and as deserving of protection. In most countries, victims of trafficking can access a range of social benefits, such as medical, psychological or social recovery benefits, including support with housing, employment and job training, albeit such rights are often very limited. In contrast, smuggled migrants who consent to violate the border can normally access only the most minimal protections. Compared to victims of trafficking, states’ duties towards smuggled migrants in international law are more limited (Bhabha and Zard, 2006). The ‘forced’-trafficked and ‘voluntary’-smuggled dichotomy is also gendered because the vast majority of victims of trafficking are assumed to be women and girls. Gender is always a central factor in policies and discussions for trafficking, as can be seen in the use of ‘trafficking of women’ as a ‘synonym for human trafficking’ in dominant narratives (Siegel and de Blank, 2010:436).

The movement of North Koreans, especially North Korean women, across the border into China has attracted a good deal of attention from human rights NGOs as well as some academic research. However, the existing literature does not provide a uniform answer to the question of whether such movement should be cast as ‘trafficking’ or ‘smuggling’. First, there are writings that focus on North Korean women’s exploitation in prostitution and marriage in China, and that frame their movement as ‘trafficking’. Such writings typically draw on the strand of feminist thinking that assumes all female prostitution is forced, which I will refer to as ‘feminist abolitionism’. Abolitionist feminists hold that prostitution is not a conscious choice and that most women in prostitution are forced and coerced into it by human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Those arguments are based on the idea that ‘prostitution is a form of violence against women’ and that ‘the exploitation of women’s sexuality’ is established under patriarchal capitalism (Barry, 1995; Raymond, 1998). Although such feminists sometimes acknowledge that the decision to prostitute oneself can be independently made, they hold that such choice is driven by poverty, gender discrimination in a job market or se-

rious problems, such as drug and/or alcohol addiction, mental illness and other unfortunate circumstances. They hold that ‘voluntary decision-making for prostitution cannot exist’, as Brown puts it (2000:28-29), and prostitution is a form of sex slavery. This perspective on prostitution means that all migrant women in prostitution are considered as ‘victims’ of human trafficking. Through this lens, being anti-prostitution is being anti-trafficking and vice versa, and states’ laws and policies that criminalise the sex trade are considered to simultaneously be measures to eliminate human trafficking.

Other feminists reject the abolitionist standpoint, arguing that prostitution is one form of employment in the service sector and that criminalising sex work and those who choose to become sex workers constitutes a violation of rights to self-determination. Rather than criminalising sex work, treating sex workers as any other workers in other employment sectors is the presented as the most effective solution to protect and promote the human rights to sex workers (Doezema, 1998; Lobasz, 2009).

The two feminist approaches also offer different readings of the distinction between ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ migration, and present different arguments about women’s mobility. Those with the abolitionist perspective argue that crossing the border itself constitutes the ‘victimisation’ of women through human trafficking for sex slavery (Huda, 2006). Robin Morgan (1994 cited in Alexander, 1997:92), once said that ‘women should stop migrating from farms to avoid being caught up in trafficking and prostitution’.

The view of women’s migration as a thing to be avoided also appears in discourse on North Korean women’s migration to China. A report from Anti-Slavery International (Muico, 2005:9) claims that ‘If you are a North Korean woman crossing the border, it is almost impossible to survive without being abused or sold’, whilst research on North Korean migrant women in prostitution in China by authors who take the abolitionist perspective on sex work (Kim et al., 2009; Kim J, 2010; Davis, 2006) present the migratory process of North Korean women into China as a form of trafficking:

Most North Korean women sold to karaoke or brothels were often deceived or kidnapped by traffickers in the first place. An interviewee revealed the following story, ‘Two traffickers who bought me from the North Korean trafficker and took me to a remote country side by taxi. When I arrived there about 30 to 40 dirty and old Chinese men were gathered and they began to rape me one by one all night. The very following afternoon, the trafficker took me to a city and sold me to a pimp for prostitution. These people treated me badly. I was beaten with fists, threatened with knife, and was never paid. These people kept threatening

me by saying that if I am not submissive they would kill me or report me to the Chinese police who will eventually send me back to North Korea which is the most horrible case that I could imagine' (Kim et al., 2009:165).

As in the above extract, North Korean migrant women are frequently depicted as 'victims of trafficking' into prostitution, evidence for which has been supplied by few academic studies and NGO reports (Kim et al, 2009; Muico, 2005). These studies also focus on how vulnerable North Korean women are tricked and coerced into prostitution by traffickers, who are mostly presented as belonging to criminal organisations. Davis (2006:123) observes that many North Korean women who seek better lives in China become victims of cross-border trafficking in a variety of ways, including being sold by their families and acquaintances, or by professional traffickers involved in transnational criminal groups. Davis tells a story in which women are often promised better jobs or good lives as wives in China, but their situations rapidly deteriorate when they fail to find jobs or suffer abuse by their new husbands, and some women are even kidnapped and forced to work in the highly exploitative sex industry. Similarly, Kim et al. (2009:166) conclude that cross-border trafficking of North Korean women is 'modern day slavery,' which should be recognized as a significant human rights' violation of international concern.

Though many NGOs and academics depict North Korean women migrants as victims and slaves, others tell a different story about their experience, one that frames their movement as smuggling rather than trafficking. For instance, a report of Committee for human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) contains the following extract from a North Korean migrant woman:

In January 2003, I crossed the Tumen River with my mother with the help of professional brokers based in Yanji. I heard that North Korean women like me usually work in the karaoke bars. I had to earn money to pay the debt and also, if possible, buy the household registration. Now I work at a boarding house where there are three ethnic Korean women and two North Korean women, including me, living together. We are sent to a number of karaoke bars where most of the customers are ethnic Korean and South Korean men. On average, I earn 300 Yuan per day. Out of about 10,000 Yuan I earn every month, I can save 4,000-5,000 Yuan. I send some of this money to my Chinese family in Jiaohe and sometimes I visit them. This kind of life is not easy, but I am doing this for a better future for myself and my family (Miss Kim, Committee for human Rights in North Korea, 2009:44).

Such women are cast by many non-governmental organisations as ‘smuggled migrants’ rather than victims of trafficking. Some NGOs report that North Koreans generally cross the border to China either through their own networks of friends and relatives in China, or by hiring professional brokers (International Crisis Group, 2006). This, they argue, means that the North Koreans involved actively agreed to violate border-controls in China, and can be legitimately defined as ‘smuggled migrants’. This view was supported by a 2008 survey conducted by Chang and her colleagues (Chang et al., 2008), which found that three-quarters of 1,300 North Korean border crossers (80% of whom are women) then in China had received assistance to escape from North Korea. Some reported that they had paid for assistance, suggesting that bribery of officials and/or networks of professional smugglers played a large role in such escapes. And yet in writings that frame North Koreans’ movement as smuggling, the emphasis is not always or necessarily on smuggling as a criminal activity. The role of missionaries and NGOs in facilitating what is dubbed an ‘underground railway’ is also highlighted (Human Right Watch, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2006), a term that references the network of antislavery activists who assisted people fleeing slavery in the US South in the nineteenth century. Thus, where the first set of writings offer a picture of North Korean mobility as leading to enslavement and those who facilitate movement as criminals and slaves, the second provides a vision in which North Korean mobility is a means of escaping a slavery-like condition and the smugglers who facilitate it are not necessarily wicked, and may even be altruistic.

How can these contradictory representations be reconciled? The most obvious answer to this question is that these descriptions relate to different types of migrants. There seems to be a general agreement among politicians, journalists, NGO workers and even some academics that several dichotomies operate to separate different groups of migrants: those who are forced to work versus those who choose to work; those who are trafficked versus those who are smuggled; those who are exploited versus those who make money; those who should be protected versus those who should be deported. The problem, however, is that these sources cannot always identify or agree on which migrants should be slotted into which group, as Derk (2010:916-7) puts it. Such complexity indicates that the divisions between different groups of migrants are not fixed, but rather constructed categories (O’Connell Davidson, 2010).

As Anderson and O’Connell Davidson (2003:7) note it: “If the primary concern is to locate, explain and combat the use of forced labour, slavery, servitude and the like, then there is no moral or analytical reason to distinguish between forced labour involving ‘illegal

immigrants' 'smuggled persons' or 'victims of trafficking'". Some therefore argue that the boundary between smuggling and trafficking brings about unnecessary confusion (Grewcock, 2003).

This is no less true for the meanings of such terms as 'trafficked/forced' and 'smuggled/voluntary' with reference to the circumstances of North Korean women in China. These dichotomies may also fail to capture the complexity and the fluidity of North Korean women's situations. There is a lack of empirical research on the migratory experience of North Korean (women) escapees. Hence, the aim of this chapter is to explore the complexities of the North Korean women's irregular migration to China through smuggling and brokerage networks based on the data collected through my interviews. In so doing, I intend to show that their experience on irregular mobility does not fit with the dichotomies of 'trafficked' (forced) or 'smuggled' (voluntary). The chapter begins with some comments on the relationship between gender and migration in North Koreans' movement to China, and then explores how North Korean women moved to China through smuggling and brokerage networks, so-called *Seon* in Korean. In the last section, I will discuss how and why defining North Korean women as victims of trafficking does not help their situation in China.

5.2 *Feminization of North Korean migration*

The proportion of women to men among North Koreans illegally present in China is around 7:3, and this ratio reflects their particular social and cultural circumstances in both North Korea and China (SKMU, 2017). In North Korea, men are conscripted to do military service for 10 years, and are involved in political parties and national industries that keep them under high levels of surveillance. North Korean women, by contrast, are less visible than men since they are primarily confined to the private sphere. Their relative invisibility allows them to become more mobile than men. Since the economic crisis of 1995-1998, known as the North Korean Famine, the traditional gender roles have been partly dismantled. As men no longer receive food rations from the government, women have been pushed to become the breadwinners, and this has prompted many to engage in various smuggling activities and the sale of necessities on the black market (Kim S, 2014:557).

In China, women's subordinate social position also allows North Korean women to remain there as illegal migrants more easily than their male counterparts. North Korean men mainly find temporary, outdoor-based, manual labour such as construction and farming in China, and working outside makes them highly visible and thus vulnerable to arrest or deportation. For this reason, North Korean men tend to stay in China for only short periods, returning to

North Korea once they have gained sufficient monetary resources. North Korean women, by contrast, can find employment in more concealed places. They often work in private houses as domestic workers, in textile factories, or in the sex industry. North Korean women even use marriage to Chinese men as a strategy for hiding. The hidden nature of these opportunities in China is a double-edged sword. It places North Korean women in the contradictory situation of being simultaneously less susceptible to immigration crackdowns and more vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Absolute poverty and gender inequality combine to ‘push’ North Korean women to cross the border. The demand for ‘wives’ in northern China, on the other hand, ‘pulls/attracts’ them.

China’s one-child policy and the culture of son preference, particularly in the countryside, have contributed significantly to sex-selective abortions that have caused severe sex ratio imbalances (Barot, 2012). This imbalance has resulted in a disproportionate number of single men at marriageable ages. In 2010, around 19 million single men in China looked for brides, and the number will likely increase to 30.9 million in 2040; and the proportion of men remaining single was 11.4 percent in 2010 and will likely increase to about 23.3 percent by 2040 (Tucker and Hook, 2013:209-219). In China, there has also been massive internal migration from rural to urban areas. Since the Confucian tradition requires sons to take responsibility for their parents’ care and therefore stay in the countryside, while daughters have the freedom to migrate to cities for the job opportunities afforded by industrialization, this migration has largely been of women (Wang and Hsiao, 2009).

Poor and isolated Chinese men, mostly farmers, in the remote rural areas of northern provinces need wives to reproduce and sustain families, but also to work the farms (Kim S, 2014:561). North Korean women’s illegality in China has led them to be commonly considered as ‘proper’ wives, because they are respectful and obedient to their husbands in order to remain hidden from authorities. Chinese men looking for ‘proper’ wives are positioned at the margin in the marriage market. These men are usually from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and are, therefore, not popular among Chinese brides. The North Korean women I interviewed often recounted that their Chinese husbands were old, poor, and disabled. Considering the marginalized positions of both Korean women with illegality in China and Chinese men neglected by local brides, these marriages have been considered ‘fair’ and ‘suitable’ (*jeockdanghan* in Korean) for each other. A similar example can be found in the marriage between poor and relatively isolated South Korean grooms and brides from South Asia who wish to migrate through marriage based on the economic difference between the two countries. These brides are commonly considered to be ‘proper’ wives (Freeman, 2005; Lee,

2009).

At the same time, these North Korean brides are also considered ‘dangerous’ because they tend to run away and thus put their husbands at risk of being charged with helping illegal migrants. North Korean women are notorious for being run-away brides (Kim J, 2010). ‘Dangerous’ is translated as *wiheomhan* in Korean. *Wiheomhan* means to put others in danger or oneself at risk. North Korean women in China are obedient to their husbands so as not to be reported by them to Chinese authorities, which makes them ‘good (*jeockdanghan*)’ wives. But their illegality may put their husbands in danger, and if they are caught by the authorities, their husbands are punished by law, including paying a fine or being put in detention for a few months. My field data revealed that Chinese husbands were active in watching their wives and followed them around to preempt any attempts to run away. In some cases, when the wives ran away, their husbands sought help from the smugglers who had brought them to China or brokers who had arranged the marriage. By tapping into the wives’ social networks, these Chinese husbands were able to ‘recover’ their wives. The growing need for women willing to enter into marriages with these single men far outweighs the concerns and risks prompted by those who run away from their husbands, thus creating strong smuggling and marriage brokerage networks.

5.3 Marriage Brokerages and Migration Industry in Asia

An increasing number of women in under-developed South Asian countries, namely Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and China, have been migrating to comparatively more prosperous countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan through marriage. Thus, cross-border marriage can be viewed as a migration strategy to pursue economically better environments; however, the benefits do not merely extend to migrants themselves, as remittances sent home also represent a means for other family members to overcome poverty for other members of family (Constable, 2005; Tsay, 2004). Migration through marriage upsurges when women’s desire for better opportunities align with the national interests of the receiving country. For example, Taiwan and South Korea introduced new policies oriented toward attracting brides through cross-border marriage in order to combat stagnating/falling birth rates (Wang and Xiao, 2009; Williams, 2010).

Following the trend of increasing cross-border marriages, the migration industry in Asia has been expanding and growing since the late 1990s. Marriage brokers and matchmaking agencies have greatly facilitated recent cross-border marriage flows and form a core part of this industry. Many couples are mediated by kinship and social networks as well as marriage

brokers (Yang and Lu, 2010). For example, kinship and social networks historically played a central role in bridging couples from developed and less-/under-developed regions to China. However, since the introduction of market economy in 1992, match-making has burgeoned into a new industry (Fan and Huang, 1998:235). Freeman (2011:87) showed that cross-border marriage between South Korean grooms and Korean-Chinese (Chosunjok) brides from north-eastern China is dominated by international marriage brokers operating a mixture of registered and unregistered matchmaking agencies mainly for profits. Such profit-driven marriage brokers in Asia have been criticized for their commercialization and commodification of cross-border marriage, and some have argued that matchmaking processes in which the potential grooms browse through catalogues of potential brides and visit them to arrange marriage within a few days are indistinct from mail-order bridal systems and should be regarded as human trafficking for sexual exploitation (for example, see Hughes 2000; 2004). In other words, settings in which men essentially buy wives with money and thus commercialize brides as 'objects' provide environments for women to become victims of sexual exploitation. In such public debates and journalistic writings, the marriage brokers - particularly those who act in an unregistered/informal capacity - are often demonized as exploiting migrants solely in pursuit of profits.

However, other analysts have critiqued such characterizations as unfair conflation of cross-border marriage and human trafficking that promote problematic stereotypes of brokers as perpetrators and brides as victims. For example, Constable (2012:227) asserted that laws such as the International Marriage Broker Regulation Act in the US, which was introduced under the influence of anti-trafficking movements, oversimplify migrant women as potential victims of trafficking and justifies anti-immigration legislation. Others have pointed that the multifaceted nature of brokers' work makes their roles and identities more complex than has commonly been depicted. Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh (2012) argued that it is difficult to distinguish between profit-driven and altruistic or formal and informal networks in migration practice. As an exemplification of such false dichotomies, other studies by Lindquist (2012; 2015) demonstrated that many unlicensed informal brokers in Indonesia facilitate labor migrations to benefit their social networks.

The migration industry has often been conceptualized as operated by businesspeople or entrepreneurs who facilitate international migration (Hernandez-Leon, 2005). However, the concept has been expanded in recent studies, which refer to a migration infrastructure rather than merely an industry that includes actors who inform and/or provide services for migrants (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen, 2013). The migration industry ultimately encompasses

various components of infrastructure beyond simply providing opportunities to move to another country, including paperwork, health screenings, and interview preparations, among other services (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014; 133). Prior to finalizing their marriages, potential grooms take so-called ‘matchmaking tours’ in order to meet with potential brides and at this stage, matchmaking businesses serve as travel agencies. In addition, the migration industry includes agencies that help with marriage registration and visa issuance. In other words, matchmaking businesses form a large chain of agents who play different roles at various stages of the cross-border marriage process (Wang and Chang, 2009).

To sum up, an increasing number of women from less-developed countries in Asia are moving to economically more-developed countries through commercially arranged marriage. The increasing dependence of Asian transnational marriage on the vast and complex migration industry encourages its growth, which in turn enhances people’s dependence on their services (Tseng, 2010). Such marriages are facilitated by individuals’ desire for a better life together with the interests of receiving countries in resolving population stagnation due to declining birth rates and aging societies. Marriage migration is also boosted by the expansion of marriage brokers and migration industry.

Migrations of North Korean women to China through marriage are partly characteristic of the recent increase in cross-border marriage migration in Asia. However, despite some similarities, the phenomenon of North Korean women’s migrations to China through marriages is somewhat distinct from the cases of more industrialized Asian countries. First, most North Korean women irregularly cross the border into China with help of local smugglers. Their marriages are usually arranged by Korean-Chinese or Chinese brokers who are introduced by these smugglers, and based on kinship and social networks, these arrangements are informal rather than professional. Furthermore, North Korean women’s vulnerability hinges on their illegal status as irregular migrants, which is quite distinct from the cases of other migrant women who legally enter foreign countries through marriage.

If the brokers and matchmakers for North Korean women and Chinese men were to become professional match-making agencies as in other Asian countries, the data for marriage brokers and migration industries in other Asian countries would be more directly comparable with the case of North Korean women, which would deepen analyses of their migration through marriage.

5.4 North Korean Women's migration process and route through seon: *Neither trafficked nor smuggled*

"When I arrived the borderland in North Korea, one unknown man approached and told me that he could help me cross the river to China. He told me he would introduce a job and accommodation to me as well. I didn't know how to cross the river avoiding surveillance from the border guards even though I knew the area well. I also didn't have enough information about China.

"We crossed the border by walking on the frozen river. Right after we crossed the river, he took me to Town A, one of small town in northern China located near the border. I was handed over to a Korean-Chinese broker there and I stayed in his house for a while. I only found out later that those kinds of people were called brokers.

"He took me to Town B which was a slightly bigger town than Town A. There I was handed over to another Korean-Chinese broker who took me to Province C, one of the largest cities in China, where I was yet again handed over to a Chinese broker who took me to Town D, a small-ish town in Province C. I stayed in the Chinese broker's house and some other North Korean women were waiting there for being sold to Chinese men. While I was there, I didn't know what exactly would happen to me but I could guess that I might be sold because some men visited the house to see us.

"After one month or so, I was handed over to a Chinese man from a remote farm village located in Province E who finally bought me. Later, I lived with him and he told me that he bought me at the price of 10,000 yuan. I then realised why I went through many cities from place to place and how the brokers made a profit on trade of people like me."

This is the story of Suk-hee recalling her first escape from North Korea in 2007 and being sold as a bride to a Chinese man. She finally escaped from her first husband mentioned above but was then caught and repatriated to North Korea. Suk-hee's story could be viewed as a typical example of North Korean women's border crossing through smuggling and brokerage networks, called seon.

The literal meaning of seon is 'line' but it corresponds interchangeably to three English terms: networks, brokerage, and/or matchmaking for marriage, in different contexts. As the direct translations of 'smuggler' and 'broker' do not exist in North Korea and the

use of English in North Korea is strictly prohibited, North Koreans were unaware of such terms or corresponding concepts until they crossed the border to China. For this reason, in their narratives, *seon* is used to refer to smugglers and brokers at different - first (crossing), second (borderland in China), third (inner cities in China) and last (countryside) - stages. 'Trafficking *seon*' is also often used to describe the brokerage networks as a whole for North Korean women's migration. So the precise meaning of *seon* should be interpreted in the given context considering the intention of North Korean interviewees. During the interviews, '*insinmaemae-seon*' (meaning 'trafficking-line' by direct translation) and '*milsu-seon*' (meaning 'smuggling-line') appear as well - both mean 'smuggling networks' in English - to refer to traffickers and smugglers, respectively. It is worth noting that the word *seon* appears when North Korean women describe 'good' marriage brokers whereas, for 'bad' brokers, they more often use '*insinmaemae-bum*' (meaning 'trafficking-criminal'). This illustrates that, in the perception of North Korean women migrants, the marriage brokers are divided into two groups, traffickers and *seon*, depending on their behaviour and how they treat the migrants.

Seon is run based on the disparate point system. The network does not have a hierarchical structure but it seems that Korean-Chinese and Chinese brokers play a key role in it as can be seen from the money flow. A third of my interviewees who were married to Chinese men described the flow of payments as follows, for example, in the case of Suk-hee's marriage:

Suk-hee's Chinese husband paid 10,000 yuan (around 1,178 pounds) to Chinese brokers in the countryside of China; who paid 8,000 yuan to the marriage brokers from large cities in China; they paid 3,000 yuan to the Korean-Chinese broker from the border area in China; and he paid 1,000 yuan to North Korean smuggler and broker from the borderland in North Korea who took Suk-hee to China in the first place. The party that makes most profit from the process is the marriage broker. In Suk-hee's case, they earned 5,000 yuan and the next in the rank are the Korean-Chinese brokers who earned 3,000 yuan from Suk-hee's movement. However, in some cases, Korean-Chinese brokers have direct connections to Chinese brokers or Chinese grooms.

Suk-hee's geographical locus shows a typical course of North Korean women's migration. Suk-hee moved from the borderland in North Korea to a small village near the border area in China, then subsequently to one of the three large provinces of Northeast China and lastly to a small farm village in the countryside remote from the border. She finally settled down and hid in a marriage with a Chinese man there. It should be noted that, as her location changes, she gradually moved further from the border and finally far into the countryside so that she could avoid the crackdowns, and this is a common pattern for women migrants.

Also, as in Suk-hee's story, North Korean women's migration to China comprises several layered stages of smuggling and brokerage networks each of which involves different groups of people from different areas including smugglers, brokers, guides and drivers, and so on.

In the following sections, I will show in more detail how North Korean women move from North Korea to small villages far from the border in China through seon, and explain the trace of routes of their movements: i.e. in steps from North Korea -> crossing the border into China -> borderland in China -> large and inner cities in China -> finally to the remote countryside. I will also describe the characters and motivations of Seon who facilitate North Korean women's movement, and how they work with and relate to North Korean women.

5.4.1 *Crossing the border*

Some academic research (Kim et al., 2009; Kim J, 2010; Davis, 2006) and international non-governmental organizations' articles (e.g. Charny, 2005; Muico, 2005), - describe North Korean women as having been forcibly kidnapped, lured, or tricked into movement to China by traffickers who are members of criminal organizations. However, the findings of my study reveal that North Korean women can cross the border illegally in three different ways: 1) independently; 2) by finding a smuggler themselves to assist them; 3) by being introduced to a smuggler by another (intermediate) broker in the initial stage of the migratory process. A third of my North Koreans interviewees, all now living in South Korea, took the first route, i.e. independent border-crossing without the aid of a smuggler, and explained that it was relatively easy when they did so years ago.

However, since the mid-2000s, border control has been reinforced, and bribing border guards to circumvent the surveillance has become more or less impossible, so making the border crossing alone has become a very difficult task for ordinary North Koreans. An increasing number of border-crossers have therefore been hiring smugglers to aid their movement in recent years. These smugglers offer useful information for border-crossing to China in general such as where and when it is safe to cross, and, for premium services that come with an advance or result-based payment, they will escort the would-be migrant to the Chinese side. The average fee for border-crossing was reported to be around 300-400 pounds just over ten years ago (International crisis group, 2006). The smugglers are typically North Koreans who themselves formerly crossed the border independently, and have progressed to providing smuggling services to other North Koreans based on their direct experience. As their success in assisting people with border crossing accumulates, they acquire a reputation as '(professional) smugglers' amongst North Koreans wishing to cross the border

either temporarily or permanently. Some informal/non-professional North Korean smugglers work mainly through their personal networks with family, cousins, friends, neighbours and acquaintances while others have extended networks including military personnel and border guards in both North Korea and China. Those with a wide network of connections tend to be more successful in smuggling ventures, and it is therefore unsurprising to find that many smugglers, even the informal/non-professional ones, have previously served in the military.

Women's border-crossing with smugglers has distinct features in comparison with their male counterparts due partly to the fact that they often ask the smugglers, in addition to helping them to cross the river, to find them jobs in China or at least connect them to other Chinese brokers who will be able to arrange work for them. So the smugglers helping women migrants are expected to have labour market connections and/or connections with Chinese job-brokers. For many of my interviews, the smugglers in North Korea and the brokers in China who assisted them were in fact relatives working together, and more generally it is the case that family relations often draw people in North Korea into the process and encourage them to act as recruiters and/or amateur smugglers in the initial stage. North Korean women who live close to the border are exposed to encounters with such recruiters who often encourage them to cross the border by assuring there will be job or marriage opportunities. Four of my interviewees, for example, who lost their family during the North Korean Famine in 1990s, were then pushed out to engage in economic activities and worked in the North Korean traditional market near the border zone, commonly known as *jangmadang*, selling products such as dried and/or salted foods. This brought them into contact with recruiters, and when the situation did not improve and they saw no hope in North Korea, they eventually decided to take up the recruiter's suggestion to move to China. The recruiter then accompanied them through the river and handed them over to other brokers in the borderland on the Chinese side. Kyung-soon, who escaped from North Korea in this manner in 2008, said:

"I used to sell tofu in Town Z. But I barely managed to break even. Right after eating a breakfast, my family would start to worry about lunch. Even the beans for tofu were running out. There was no hope to sustain our life with selling tofu. Yet, I could not let my family die. At that time, I was often advised to go to China by one of my customers in Town Z who I did not really know personally. He told me that he could take me to China for free. So, there were no reasons not to follow him."

Although the possibility of moving was made known to women like kyung-soon by a recruiter,

it was nonetheless their choice to leave the country. Where North Korean women's mobility is conceptualized as 'trafficking', the initial recruiting stage is also depicted as 'forced' and their voluntary participation in smuggling effectively disappears in the victimhood-focused discourse. And yet more than half of my interviewees actively sought out informal/non-professional smugglers in the first place. Hwasun who crossed the border to China in 2002 said:

"When I failed to cross the river independently four times, I realised that I needed someone to help me. I discreetly asked around about seon. It took a long time and I had to wait almost one year to reach seon. I had to do all of it very secretly because, if my plan to go to China had been discovered by anyone involved in National Security or wishing to report it to the party, I would have been caught and imprisoned. For this reason, I asked only reliable and trustworthy people about seon. It was quite hard to find out whom among my acquaintances would not betray me and I could not easily trust even my family on this matter. In the very long run, I reached seon and successfully crossed the border into China through them."

As shown in Hwasun's case, seon has been increasingly important in enabling North Korean women to move to China. Considering for the obstacles to their independent border-crossing, some of my interviewees said "Using seon is almost a free-pass for going to China" and Suk-hee, who went to China on her own in her first attempt but was caught, repatriated and imprisoned in labour camps, recalled her second attempt aided by seon as follows:

"I went up to the border area and desperately looked for brokers. I wanted to be trafficked so I can migrate to China. I learned that, if I was sold, I would be able to live in China. I guess I still didn't want to be sold like a dog in the market. But I had no other choice but being sold in order to live in China as it would at least mean a chance for survival. I knew that it was a sort of gambling with my life. Even if it was to end in failure, I would have at least have taken the chance."

"Whoever I met that seemed to be a broker near the border area, I said to them 'If you could sell me, I would go to China with you'. In the end, I crossed the river with a man I did not really know in person but who assured me to he would arrange a marriage with a Chinese man. I asked him to sell me to someone living in a very rural area where I could properly hide. I thought that it would be

better to live in a deep and quiet countryside where I could easily hide from both the public and the police. When I got caught in my first attempt, I was living in a town. This time, I was always cautious about being recognized as a North Korean. Perhaps there were more opportunities for jobs in cities and I even knew that some jobs like being a hostess or waitress were available there. But anything in the cities and large towns seemed so dangerous as I could easily be caught.”

Very few of my interviewees had been approached and persuaded to move by smugglers and, in fact, most of them sought out brokers once they had already made the decision to cross the border as in the cases of Hwasun and Suk-hee. In other words, rather than being ‘forced’ and/or ‘trafficked’ by wicked criminals, my interviewees, whether they initiated contact with seon or were alerted to the possibility of crossing by seon, crossed the border voluntarily, albeit illegally. My interviewees’ experience does not fit with the stereotype of North Korean women as ‘victims of trafficking’ - the source of their oppression, as outlined in the previous chapter, is the North Korean state, not organized crime groups. Indeed, the fact that the seon is the mediator who provides an opportunity to escape the horrors details in Chapter 1 and to seek a better life casts doubt on the discourse that describes those who facilitate movement as ‘evil traffickers’. Most North Korean smugglers and brokers in seon are as vulnerable to the horrific rights abuses described in the previous chapter as the women they help to move. Rather than being ‘criminals’, they are individuals living in extremely difficult circumstances, who have the good fortune to be related to brokers in China through personal and/or social networks such as kinship or business relationship. Although they may seek economic gain from arranging North Korean women’s irregular border-crossing, they do so from a position of almost comparable disadvantage and vulnerability, and in general, they provide the service that they say they can provide to women who stand in desperate need of those services.

5.4.2 *On the move in China with brokers*

As described in the previous section, my North Korean women interviewees crossed the border into China irregularly, and mostly with the aid of smugglers and brokers. Those who arrived in China on their own, i.e. without the assistance of smugglers or brokers, faced extreme difficulties as they attempted to survive in a completely new land. The urgent issue would be to sort out food and shelter. Mijin escaped from North Korea by herself in 2009 and recalled her experience of that time, knocking on doors in the borderland villages looking for food, clothes and temporary lodging, as follows:

“When I crossed the river, I looked like a beggar. I was completely wet, had no shoes and my bottom clothes were missing as the fast stream of the river took them away. I arrived on the Chinese side at 10pm-ish. I then climbed the mountain near the riverside to see where to go and found a village from there. It was at around 2-3am, I guess. I knocked on a few doors with a light on and a house owner finally let me in, and kindly gave me some food and clothes. I told her that I came to make money. She told me that I could be caught by the crackdown in the borderland and so advised me to go to an inner part of China. She also told me that she could introduce some people who could offer jobs for me. She phoned and then a man came to her house. He gave some Chinese money to her and I followed him to his house that day. There were two other North Korean women already in his house where I stayed for a few weeks.”

Some others among my interviewees who crossed the border independently also went to the brokers' house and gained help to settle down in China with jobs and shelter. Their survival depended on unknown people they came across in the borderland. The North Korean famine would have been widely known especially to the village people near the borderland at that time, and, as border-dwellers in China mostly share the same ethnic roots with North Koreans, they were on the whole willing to introduce them to brokers and other helping hands rather than reporting them to the police or border guards.

Those who crossed the river with North Korean smugglers and brokers - i.e. *seon* - also moved to brokers' houses, but did so directly from the river without having to take risks as they hunted for help, since this was arranged in advance by the *seon*. In-suk, who crossed the border with a North Korean smuggler in early 2010, shared her experience:

“Soon after arriving in the Chinese side of border, I saw a car waiting for us. I met with a Korean-Chinese man inside the car and the smuggler said to me that he would take care of me from then on. The Korean-Chinese man then asked me to hide in the trunk of his car. It took about twenty minutes or so from the border to his house.”

The brokers' house was the first destination for most of my female interviewees when they crossed the border. Such brokers are mostly Korean-Chinese living in provinces close to the border and are usually called by North Koreans ‘Chosŏnjok brokers’ (Chosŏnjok means Korean-Chinese), ‘Chosŏnjok seon’ or ‘Kuk-kyung brokers’ (Kuk-kyung means border). Another common name attached to them, although it may not be an accurate reflection, is

‘Yanbian brokers’ as the Yanbian Autonomous Korean Prefecture, created in 1952, has the highest concentration of ethnic Korean-Chinese people. Many North Koreans in fact have relatives in the Yanbian Prefecture since a significant migration to the region was made in the 19th century, especially from the northern part of Korea. Korean-Chinese tend to be sympathetic to the victims of mass starvation in North Korea and to provide food, shelter and work for them when they cross the border and arrive at their villages, not merely for relatives but for North Korean migrants in general.

The brokers’ contribution to the settlement of North Korean women escapees are crucial and the job opportunities they introduce women to are mainly in the domestic sphere, so that they can evade surveillance. These brokers often make fake ID cards, either Chinese or South Korean passports, which are of immense help when the escapees finally move out of China - for the check-in for ships or aeroplanes. There is no fixed price for the ID cards but my interviewees reported it could cost be between 1500 and 7000 pounds. Besides jobs, they would link North Korean women to marriage brokers who would live and work in large cities further from the border.² The working ground of Korean-Chinese brokers spans around the border area and they form a network with other brokers mainly based on personal relationships and/or kinship. Some of the most successful Korean-Chinese brokers, for example, are the head of villages or district representatives as they have an access to more information for the residents by which they can create their own organisation of brokers. Another example of successful brokers is the principle of a primary school in one province, where he stretches his own web by moulding other teachers’ individual networks. A distinct feature for the Korean-Chinese brokerage network is that it includes a number of pastors and missionaries in churches near the borderland who are linked with marriage brokers and other Christian networks. This means that some brokers have networks that span to include even South Korean brokers who may eventually enable them to help North Koreans move to South Korea.

Women who crossed the border with smugglers would stay at the Korean-Chinese brokers’ house until further contacts from the brokers in the inner cities come through. As a result, the duration of their stay would vary from a few weeks to as long as one or two years, which reflects the informal nature of the brokerage in the region. Far from being a well-oiled criminal machine, job and/or marriage arrangements had to be made in an informal and

² The matchmaking is rarely conceived directly by the border-crossing brokers themselves unless they have close connections with the grooms or people in the village but is mostly managed by ‘marriage brokers’ who specialise in matching North Korean women to Chinese grooms typically in remote villages in the countryside.

irregular fashion leading to a wide range of possible waiting times. During those waiting periods, North Korean women are usually kept inside the house to avoid border agency surveillance. Many of my women interviewees also worked as nannies or caregivers during this waiting period, as illustrated by the following interview extract from and Ji-sun, who arrived in China in 2000:

“When I just arrived in China, I lived in their house working for the family. I washed clothes for them and also cooked, cleaned and cared for their sons. I did everything that I was asked to. During my stay, I wanted to go to school like their children. I was 18 years old at the time. I was still young. I asked them to send me to school after three months I had lived with them, They replied ‘We wish we could but the neighbours seem to have started to suspect that you are a North Korean. If they find out about you, they are most likely to report you to the Chinese authorities in which case you will be arrested and sent back to your country. We will introduce a Chinese man who can take care of you.’ I didn’t have a choice but to follow them. I thought I was too young to marry but marriage seemed better than being sent back to North Korea.”

As can be seen in Ji-sun’s case, Korean-Chinese brokers may also want to make use of North Korean women’s labour in the form of nanny and domestic work. Also, it is a common scenario that women are advised or even persuaded to marry Chinese men for their own safety in China, as described by Miseon who arrived in China for the second time in 2007:

“The Korean-Chinese man who allowed me to stay in his house in one of small cities in Province C, introduced me to a Chinese man who also knew my previous Chinese husband in person. During my stay in his house, he often said ‘You should marry a Chinese man from the inner part of China so that you have a protection from him. No one can protect you more than your husband.’ Also, the inner areas distant from the border enable you to hide from Chinese authorities. So, I agreed to the proposed marriage as all I wanted at that time was not to be sent back to North Korea.”

Some North Korean women, especially those who had re-escaped from North Korea, approached and took the initiative to ask the brokers to arrange a marriage with a Chinese man or to introduce them to the marriage brokers. They had already experienced arrest, interrogation, repatriation, torture and imprisonment in labour camps, so their priority was

to hide from officials or any form of surveillance. Kyung-suk who escaped from North Korea for the second time in 2010 said:

“When I escaped again from North Korea, I crossed the Tumen river with seon. I knew that if I used the seon, I would go to China for free and be taken to the broker’s house where I could have opportunities for marriage. I learned it from my first escape. At that time, I did not marry and worked in a restaurant. After three months, I was caught by the Chinese police. I always thought that it was my mistake. I was not careful enough. If I had married, I would have been protected by my Chinese husband and by his family. I did not want to make the same mistake this time. So, I decided to marry someone at the earliest opportunity, as the idea of being sent back to North Korea was too horrible.”

Not all of my women interviewees wanted to marry though and some asked their brokers to find job opportunities for them instead. Upon any proposals for marriage, they would choose to work their way as nannies, caregivers or waitresses in restaurants although the job prospects and environments were not always friendly, given their illegal status.

5.4.3 *Seon: brokers or traffickers?*

Though in the cases discussed so far, the Korean-Chinese brokers were honest, this is not always so. Some of my interviewees who rejected marriage proposals faced deception by the brokers at a later stage. In some cases, they were told they were going to meet with a job broker, but then sold to a marriage broker instead. Most women would realise their situation only after they arrived in the marriage brokers’ house in the inner city, or in their future Chinese husband’s house in a quiet part of the countryside. This lack of awareness of what was really going on was mainly due to their inability to understand the conversations in Chinese between the Korean-Chinese and the marriage brokers. Lack of geographical knowledge is another reason why they did not necessarily suspect what was happening, and their illegal status makes them so dependent on their Korean-Chinese brokers that they will follow them unless a clear wrong signal is given. A few of my women interviewees did spot that something was wrong, and realizing that they were being sold, managed to escape from the marriage brokers. Sunjeong, who escaped from North Korea in 2006, recalled her experience as follows:

“It felt strange. When I was going to the toilet, I felt I was being watched. Then, for the few minutes in the toilet, a snap thought occurred to me that maybe these people were going to sell me. When I was in North Korea, I heard

from a rumour about some bad people who sold North Korean women in China and it rang a bell at the time. The rumour was widespread and it said that North Korean women were sold like pigs and dogs. I then thought that the brokers who were taking me to the inner cities were maybe the bad people. As soon as the train arrived at the next stop, I got off and ran as fast as I could.”

Yun, who escaped from North Korea in 2004, also ran away from Chinese brokers:

“(As I said earlier,) I crossed the border into China with my friend. After we were handed over to Chinese brokers from inner cities, she started to cry saying ‘we are going to be sold. I don’t want to be sold’. I whispered her ‘No way, I am going to run away’. She asked me to run away together. But she did not stop crying, so I could not help her. Also, the brokers kept watching us. I told them that I was going to a toilet but they followed me even in front of it. I entered and checked the windows. I thought that I could jump out of the window. At that time, I was wearing in the red clothes. The colour of cloth was very distinctive, so I was taking off while running away. I kept running to the mountain and climbed it. I used to live in a mountain village in North Korea. I had the self-confidence to climb a mountain faster than anyone. I thought that it was relatively easier to hide myself deep in the mountains.”

After running away from Chinese brokers, what happened to escaped my interviewees including Sunjeong, and Yun. Half of them wandered around the streets and asked anyone who they ran into there for help. Yun’s story, after hiding herself in the mountains, continued as follows:

“After I stayed in the mountains a night, I came down. I kept walking for many hours. I wanted to ask anyone in the street for help. Everyone and anyone spoke Chinese there. I do not speak Chinese. I tried to find Korean-Chinese but I did not know where I was. Only I knew was that here would be far from the border, so it would be hard to see Korean-Chinese. I had not seen a Korean-Chinese since coming down from the mountain. It occurred to me that some of my neighbours got food from churches in China. I drew the cross of church with my fingers to anyone that I encountered in the street. I thought if people recognised the cross, they would take me to a church. As I drew the cross, some people pointed in a certain direction. I followed that direction, but I arrived at a hospital. They misunderstood the cross of church as the sign of hospital. The two

signs look the same I suppose. I may have looked like a patient or a psychotic because I was barely dressed without shoes and had not eaten for two days at all. I entered a grocery store and gestured for the owner to give me some rice with a spoon. She gave me some steamed bread and called someone. I thought that she might call the police. I hesitated, wondering whether to run away again. I was too tired and hungry to run away again. Ten minutes later, a Chinese guy in riding a motorcycle came to that grocery store. He made a phone call to someone and he gave the mobile phone to me. The person on the other end of the line spoke Korean to me. She asked me 'Where are you from?' So I answered I was from Town G. I did not tell that I am a North Korean because they might report me to Chinese police. I told that I came here to get a job. And then, she asked me to hand over the mobile phone to the Chinese guy. I guessed that she asked him to take me to her house. He gestured me to ride his motorcycle. He took me somewhere by taking me on a motorcycle. It took two or three hours. I arrived at the house of a village foreman. His family provided a meal and bed for me. I frankly told them that I am from North Korea and wanted to make some money. He said 'There are two North Korea women who married to Chinese men in our village. I brought them from Town G in China.' I interrupted him saying, 'I don't want to marry'. He continued to say 'there are no jobs like a nanny, waitress or cleaner in this farming village. If you do not want to marry, I won't force you. If you go into cities where a lot of Korean-Chinese live, you can find those kinds of jobs. I will help you.' Next day, he took me to the bus stop and gave me Chinese Yuan. When a bus stopped, he got on the bus with me saying something to the driver. I could not understand but I could guess that he said my destination. After getting off the bus, I asked people where I could find a church. I went there and said 'I was told that North Koreans receive help from church'. People in the church were very nice to me. I felt safe and comfortable for the first time since I arrived in China. After I stayed in the church for two or three days, one of missionaries asked me my age, I told her that I am 22 years old. She said me 'You are young, so you should marry to a Chinese man. Your husband leads you to live safely in China'. I rejected her proposal and said her 'I don't need money. If you provide me a meal and bed. It is ok.' She sent me to another church, so I lived and worked as a nanny there for a while."

Mi-Jung and Hwasun had similar experiences to Yun after their escape. Hwasun also settled

in a Korean-Chinese pastors' house. Indeed, Mi-Jung, Hwasun and Yun all lived with the family of a broker and worked as an unpaid nanny after having rejected a marriage proposal. They ran away from Chinese brokers while heading for inner cities in China and accidentally went to small villages and then went to an inner city before finally returning to the borderland. Yun's story illustrates how such women keep encountering unknown people who play a role as informal brokers when they come into contact with North Korean women. Until Yun settled down in a church, her journey passed through many informal brokers or individuals working with them: the grocery owner, the man riding a motorcycle, the head of village, his family, the bus driver, and the individuals in churches including missionaries and pastors. Yun ran into those people by chance. However, whoever she met, their advice was always to marry to a Chinese man living deep in the countryside. It seems no coincidence that the people she met were willing and able to play this role of informal broker. Most North Korean women do not speak Chinese, so they can only communicate with Korean-Chinese. As discussed earlier, marriage is well known as an option for North Korean women and one that can be profitably arranged. Korean-Chinese people play a critical role in connecting North Korean women and Chinese brokers. Therefore, a lack of Chinese language skills and the value of North Korean women as wives creates an economic opportunity for Korean-Chinese who come into contact with North Korean women in China. Interestingly, the Korean-Chinese brokers in China from my interviewees' stories cannot simply be divided into one of two groups: those who altruistically help North Korean women and those who think only of selling them for profit. My interviewees describe encountering people who had mixed motivations. On the one hand, they sought to help North Korean women, but on the other hand, they pursued their own material and financial interests.

In contrast to Yun's story, other interviewees who escaped from marriage brokers when they realised they were going to be sold or 'trafficked', contacted their original Korean-Chinese broker, i.e., the person who sold them. Yunjeong, who escaped from North Korea in 2003, said:

"It was winter, but I could not dress properly. This is because if I put on my coat, it would be obvious that I was going to run away. So I wore only underwear and ran away very fast at 1am. I was preoccupied with two thoughts; one was that if I got caught by them, I would be killed. The other was that if I was successful in running away from them, where could I go? I went to the nearest train station and hid myself in a toilet for that night. I called the Korean-Chinese broker who sold me to the Chinese brokers. I had nothing but the underwear. I

was so cold and hungry. The only left thing to me was his phone number.”

Jeong-suk, three times sold as a wife, described similar experiences:

“I was deceived by one of my distant cousins living in China who later turned out to be a trafficker. He told me he would find a job in a Korean restaurant for me. When I came to his house, he handed me over to a Chinese guy and I came his house in an unknown land. In few weeks, I knew that I was going to be sold to a Han Chinese man in one of rural villages in Province M for the price of 800 yuan. After noticing this, I ran away thanks to weakening in surveillance one day. I went to the nearest train station but did not know where to go from there.

“An unknown ethnic Korean man approached me and he said he would help me. I didn’t speak Chinese, I thought Korean Chinese would be better. I took a train with him. I overheard his speaking with someone on the phone in Chinese. I felt that something was going wrong, but I had no choice but to follow him. After arrival, I got to know that it was like a Karaoke bar but was actually a sort of brothel where I would have to work as a prostitute. I ran away and went back to the train station. He followed me. I begged him ‘please don’t sell me there, I can’t sing nor speak Chinese.’ I gave him my cousin’s mobile number and asked him to let me speak with him. My cousin came to the train station to pick me up. I argued with and stubbornly said to him ‘I don’t want to marry. If you sell me again, you will pay for it.’ He introduced me to the owner of a car wash in Province F. I worked there as a cleaner for three months. I didn’t get paid but was fed with a small amount of food for working. After three months, I found out that the car wash owner was seeking for some chances to sell me as a bride. I ran away from there one night and came back to my cousin’s house.”

As has been described, Jeong-suk, negotiated with her broker to have a job instead of marrying. Other interviewees who ran away had a similar experience to Soon-York. I asked those women, “The broker had deceived and sold you, so why did you call him after you had escaped?” Many of them, including Jin-suk replied along the following lines:

“All the people around me in the train station were unknown. If I was recognized as a North Korean, I would be reported. Even though the broker lied to me and sold me, he was the only one who would not report me to the

police. I thought even if he sells me again, there would be no one but him who could help me out.”

From this answer, it seems that the women had some level of trust in their Korean-Chinese brokers. Though they may have ultimately sold and deceived them, these brokers had also helped my interviewees by providing them food and accommodation after the border crossing for periods of between a few weeks to few years. During that time, my interviewees were close to the brokers and built up a feeling of trust. Kyung-sin said:

“While I was staying at my cousin’s house in City H, which is a border town, I often went to the river to have a look at the route for crossing. One day, I met them when I was walking around the riverside which is a must-see for Chinese tourists. One Chinese tourist couple talked to me about their life in Chia. They told me that they are better off. But they said to me ‘we are not happy because we don’t have daughters but boys. We have longed to have a daughter. It may be an unrealised dream as we become old’. They bought me a lot of food that I could eat for several days. They were very kind of me. I felt they were very nice people. In a short time, they visited the riverside again to see me and told me that they wanted to adopt a daughter from North Korea. They said to me ‘If you come with us, we will treat you well as our biological daughter.’ I trusted what they told me, so I followed them. After I arrived their home, I wasn’t actually treated as a daughter. I was required to do hard work but I was happy as long as I could eat and survive.

“I didn’t know they are the people called ‘traffickers’. After I came to South Korea, and I had some chances to talk with other North Korean escapees, I understood that this Chinese couple might be traffickers. But I don’t care whatever they were called or who they were. Without them, I would have died of hunger or suffered from absolute poverty in North Korea.

“Even though they advised me to marry my ex-husband who tortured me for many years, they didn’t know his character and personality. So it isn’t their fault. I was also told by them that my ex-husband is one of their remote cousins. I don’t think they really sold me but introduced him to me. In my mind, they just wanted to help me as it was better to marry a Chinese man due to my illegal status. So I didn’t reject their marriage suggestion. They aren’t bad people who would sell me. They were very nice to me.”

Although in these cases, my interviewees recognized that Korean-Chinese brokers had deceived and sold them, they still did not regard them as ‘traffickers’. Miseon said:

“He and his wife were nice to me while I was staying at their home. I said that he was a principle of a primary school. So, they were not the kind of bad people who sold women for their own interest like traffickers.”

When I asked her “Weren’t they paid for introducing you to Chinese brokers?” she replied:

“Yes, after I was handed over to Chinese brokers, they were paid 2000 yuan by the Chinese brokers for selling me.”

So I asked her again, “They sold you and got money, but they were not traffickers. How do you think of what they did?” She said:

“I understand that they were paid. They helped me move to China in order to earn money. If they hadn’t wanted to make money by selling me, I would not have got to China.”

North Korean women’s mobility is facilitated by Korean-Chinese brokers’ pursuit of their own interests. Their relationship is based on mutual self-interest. However, this relationship is only regarded as mutual and legitimated by North Korean women if the brokers negotiate with them in relation to marriage. If the women reject a marriage arrangement and the brokers refuse to provide alternative options, such as finding them a job or allowing them to wait for a longer period, it generates conflict in the relationship between the North Korean woman and the broker. In a few cases, this conflict led to the betrayal of, or violence against North Korean women by Korean-Chinese brokers. For example, after Su-yeon escaped twice in the process of being moved to Chinese inner cities with Chinese brokers, and returned to her Korean-Chinese broker again and again, he reported her to Chinese authorities and she was repatriated to North Korea. Another of my interviewees, Hee-sun, rejected her marriage, ran away and returned to her Korean-Chinese broker. Five days later, she was kidnapped by Chinese brokers and then sold to a Chinese man. Moreover, when one of my interviewees, Jin-suk, ran away from Chinese brokers and came back to her Korean-Chinese brokers, they waited till she was asleep that night, tied her up tightly and threw her towards the river, shouting “Fucking whore! Go back to your home!”. She was saved by a border guard in China and then repatriated to North Korea.

5.4.4 Staying in marriage brokers' houses and waiting to be sold

As many of my interviewees were handed over from Korean-Chinese brokers to marriage brokers, they moved from Chinese borderland to the brokers' houses in cities further from the border. While staying with the brokers, my interviewees waited to be seen by their potential Chinese grooms or by other Chinese brokers who would introduce them to Chinese grooms. The period they stayed with the brokers varied between a few weeks and several months. In many cases, the length of time it took to find a husband depended on Chinese grooms' personal preferences for women in terms of physical characteristics such as age and appearance. Younger, healthier looking women, and those socially imagined as pretty, were more likely to be preferred by both Chinese grooms and Chinese brokers. In some cases, however, my interviewees were also able to choose husbands of their preference.

The brokers connecting Korean-Chinese brokers from the borderland with Chinese grooms and brokers from rural areas are called *sagshi-jangsa* in Korean (literally translated into selling brides or bride business) and *seon*. They play the role of a marriage matchmaking agency, and are more professional about brokerage than are the Korean-Chinese brokers. This is because the latter have other forms of employment and engage in brokering merely as a sort of part time job. They also work independently and their networks are mainly built upon kinship. By contrast, marriage brokers typically work in groups and divide their labour according to their ethnicity. They have more extended networks in China, including links to Chinese officials and businessmen. Marriage broker groups are made up of a mix of Korean-Chinese and Chinese people. Korean-Chinese members of the group usually work with the brokers in the borderland, whilst Chinese members of the group work with Chinese grooms and Chinese brokers from countryside. These marriage brokers are called sometimes *insinmaemaebum* (literally translated into traffickers in English) or *insinmaemae seon* (literally translated into the networks for trafficking in English). Some of my interviewees said: "I wanted to go to China, so I looked for *insinmaemae seon*".

When my interviewees were treated badly by marriage brokers, for instance being subjected to rape and/or physical or psychological abuse, they referred to the marriage brokers as traffickers. Three of my interviewees were raped by such brokers. Sunbok described her experience as follows:

"On 31th August 2000, I and my friend crossed the river with her cousin. She took us to a house near the River. After a while, two Korean Chinese took us one of houses in the city. Later I found out that house was a sort of brokers' house selling North Korean women. We stayed there for three months until I was sold

to a Han Chinese man for the price of 800 yuan as a bride. During that period, we were imprisoned and raped many times by many brokers who I didn't know. I wanted to be sold as soon as possible because I could not bear those bastards any more."

Brokers who sold North Korean women to sex industry to work as bar/karaoke hostesses were also sometimes referred to as traffickers by my interviewees. Marriage brokers are called 'sagshi-jangsa' in Korean, but sagshi has a double meaning - both brides and whores - in Korean. Su-yeon said:

"Someone who the broker introduced me to in the town promised to find me a job in a restaurant. But once I arrived there, I found out I was deceived and knew he had sold me to a Karaoke bar. I was again sold at 2000 yuan. The Karaoke was run by a Chinese criminal organization who looked really frightening. I couldn't do anything to improve my situation, I was afraid of being beaten even more than of being reported to the police. When I did what they asked me to do, I wasn't beaten. North Korean women weren't treated as human beings. I wanted to get away from this situation so I tried to kill myself. I took all kinds of pills that I found. I awoke three days later. Then I was considered a big headache in the Karaoke. I got beaten a lot after that. I couldn't live any more there. I asked one of managers there to sell me for a marriage with a Chinese man."

However, though some are violently exploitative, there are also marriage brokers who treated my interviewees well. Indeed, relationships between some women and marriage brokers were so good that after they married and settled down in a countryside with their husbands' family, they would contact their marriage brokers and ask them for help in the following four situations: 1) when they had a conflict with or were treated badly by the husbands and family, including physical or psychological abuse 2) when they escaped or thought of escaping from their husbands 3) when they wanted to go to South Korea 4) when they want to find a job. Some of my interviewees called such requests for help as requests for 'after-service' saying: "I asked him for after-service". They spoke the words 'after-service' in English. The term 'after-service' is commonly used in the sense of 'after-sales service or follow-up service' in South Korea. My interviewees learned the term after arriving in South Korea, and felt that it captured the forms of assistance they had been provided by their brokers following their marriages. They had been able to request such 'after-service' because, as match-making agents who acted on the part of the women, the brokers continued

to have some responsibility towards them after the marriage was arranged. They also felt able to approach brokers for ‘after-service’ because the brokers knew and understood their particular situations, and because they trusted them not to report them to the police.

The use of the term ‘after-service’ and the fact that some of my interviewees successfully availed themselves of that service, shows that it is incorrect (at least in their cases) to conceive of the transaction between marriage broker and groom as a simple commodity exchange, with the broker selling the woman as an object/commodity. Indeed, it suggests that the marriage broker is imagined as acting on behalf of the woman and has certain obligations towards her, and that this understanding of the relationship is in fact shared by some marriage brokers who do honour those obligations when called upon to do so.

5.5 *Conclusion*

Data from my North Korean women interviewees does not sit easily with either of the two dominant representations of North Korean border crossing into China. Unlike depictions of North Korean women as victims of trafficking in the anti-trafficking campaign literature, my interviewees were not forced across the border by traffickers, but actively chose to cross to China in order to ameliorate or escape desperate and often life-threatening circumstances, and frequently they actively sought out parties that would be able to assist them in achieving that goal. Through the lens of the UN Protocols on smuggling and on trafficking, these women were smuggled migrants, not victims of trafficking, as they crossed the border, for smuggling involves voluntary participants, whereas trafficking occurs “by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion or of fraud and/or deception for the purpose of exploitation” (Gallagher 2002, 26). Since the North Korean women in my study voluntarily crossed into China, they are technically smuggled migrants.

If their subsequent stories resembled that of Miss Kang, quoted at the start of this chapter, such that they had found reasonably well paid work and been able to remit money to their families, or if they had managed to immediately use the ‘underground railway’ to escape to South Korea, then the label ‘smuggled’ might appear to fit. However, this was not the case for my interviewees, for whom passage into China initiated dependency on a series of actors and brokers, some of whom treated them fairly or even kindly, others of whom exploited or abused them to varying degrees.

The seon, either ‘traffickers’ or ‘good brokers,’ defied the dichotomy between altruistic or profit-oriented brokerage networks. The motivations of these sets of actors were not fixed but ranged along a continuum. Seon provides a vital service for North Korean women’s migration,

which is often overlooked in the literature. North Korean women in China are vulnerable to exploitation, but their vulnerability arises mostly from their illegal status in the country into which they are smuggled, not from having been ‘trafficked’. As illegal migrants, North Korean women cannot carry out daily activities openly in China, and therefore must rely on someone to broker all arrangements that make their life possible, including marriage. Their brokers cannot be equated to traffickers, as the dominant discourse suggests.

The UN protocols on trafficking and smuggling do not fully capture the complex situations that migrants face in their migration process (Bhabha and Zard 2006). They are designed to prioritize strengthening border controls to ensure national security and to combat transnational organized criminal activities, not to protect migrants’ human rights (Lobasz 2009). This is a problem in all contexts, but that problem is especially marked when people are seeking to move from an authoritarian state like North Korea. By voluntarily making an unauthorized border crossing to China, whether independently or with the assistance of a smuggler, North Koreans become criminals in the eyes of the North Korean state, and ‘illegal immigrants’ in the eyes of the Chinese state. Like the UK, the US, and other states, the Chinese state claims and exercises the right to deport those illegally present on its territory. For North Koreans, this will mean repatriation to the kind of experiences described in the previous chapter.

Even North Koreans who manage to obtain the status of ‘victim of trafficking’ - not an easy status to attain because of the burden of proof - are not necessarily protected from repatriation. North Koreans afforded the status of victims of trafficking by the Chinese authorities have been repatriated (Kim J, 2010). Once back in North Korea, they face punishment in labour camps as criminals and traitors who left the country without permission rather than victims of trafficking. The 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry report on the human rights situation in North Korea urges countries to protect North Korean women as victims of trafficking, (UN Commission of Inquiry, 2014), and yet it is China’s treatment of North Koreans as illegal immigrants, more than its failure to protect ‘victims of trafficking’, that made my interviewees so vulnerable to maltreatment.

My interviewees in general wanted to move and were therefore complicit with seon, the smuggling and brokerage networks, who facilitated their movement. In fact, many North Korean women actively seek a third party to sell them as brides to Chinese men or agree to an arranged marriage through brokerage. However, as marriages involving undocumented North Korean women are not legally binding, if the women are caught by the Chinese authorities, they face deportation.

The conventional dichotomic concepts in the dominant narratives of smuggled or trafficked fail to capture the complexity North Korean migrant situations. The line between trafficking and smuggling does not help us to grasp the human rights violations that many North Korean women escapees face. Being voluntarily smuggled does not necessarily mean an absence of victimization, as smuggled women can end up being trapped in violent, exploitative relationships with their smugglers or their husbands. Distinguishing between smuggling and trafficking is only of use to states looking to determine who to punish rather than who to protect and how.

The immigration and asylum policies pursued by non-pariah states, along with their militarized borders, are legitimated by the claim that they are designed to keep people out rather than lock them in (only the latter being seen to violate human rights), and yet the effect of keeping people out of one state is to lock them into another. This is very clearly illustrated by the effects of China's immigration regime on North Koreans.

The Chinese government has been criticized by international communities for its failure to protect North Korean escapees and for returning victims of trafficking to a state known for rampant violations of human rights, and there are certainly alternative immigration and asylum policies that China could pursue to ameliorate the plight of North Korean migrants without surrendering any sovereign right to border control. First, China could and should reconsider its political agenda in favour of humanitarian needs and grant refugee status to North Koreans in China. Such a move would uphold the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol. Although North Korean escapees are classified as refugees under the two legislations (Kim M, 2010:424), the Chinese government has prioritized its 1986 repatriation agreement with North Korea by categorizing North Koreans as illegal economic migrants, which opens them up to various forms of exploitations and abuses (Margesson, Chanlett-Avery, and Bruno, 2007). Second, if refugee status is not possible, the Chinese government could still halt its repatriation practice, and instead send North Koreans to other countries, including South Korea, where they can receive immediate citizenship. Last, China could ratify the International Convention on Migrant Workers and Members for North Korean migrants and the UN Trafficking Protocol to protect the basic human rights of North Korean migrants.

6. WIVES OR SLAVES? NORTH KOREAN WIVES IN CHINA

6.1 *Introduction*

North Korean women's marriage has been depicted as forced, and consequently treated as a form of 'modern slavery' by anti-slavery activists and anti-trafficking campaigners. For example, in the public lecture titled 'Women will be forced to marry' in London, Kevin Bales, a new abolitionist, stated that Chinese husbands pay: "\$750 for a North Korean slave wife", and that "human rights activists have voiced concerns that it is becoming increasingly easy to enslave another human being as the cost plummets" (Reuters, 2017). Amnesty International (2018) reports that "North Korean women are trafficked into forced marriages", while Free the Slaves (2010) asserts that "North Korean women face forced marriage as a 'hidden form of slavery' in China". In the academic literature too, North Korean women are often represented as victims of human trafficking and forced marriage in China (Kim et al., 2009; Kim J, 2010; Lee, 2010; Park et al., 2010). In dominant policy, media, academic and campaigning discourse (Amnesty International, 2018; Human Right Watch, 2018; Muico, 2005), North Korean women are said to be slave wives, i.e. victims of forced marriage, for the following five reasons. First, it is asserted that North Korean women do not consent to marry Chinese men, with consent being held to include the right to refuse a proposal of marriage. Thus, North Korean women's marriages to Chinese men are judged to be involuntary. Second, marriages between North Korean women and Chinese men are said to be coercive and violent. North Korean wives are reported to suffer domestic violence, forced labour, rape, and other slavery-like practices. Third, the reason why Chinese men become so violent in these marriages is said to be because they regard women as their 'property', having paid the trafficker during the marriage process, and the women, being the 'purchased objects', are described as 'slaves with no freedom'. Fourth, the description of North Korean women as 'slaves' reflects the fact that some of those who have escaped marriage to Chinese men and managed to flee from China describe themselves as having been treated as slaves.

Fifth, North Korean women are represented as passive in dominant discourse, where the emphasis on the constraints on their freedom associated with their illegal status in China and

the possibility of forcible repatriation to North Korea. These five characteristics -lead anti-trafficking and anti-modern slavery campaigners to identify North Korean women's marriages to Chinese men as forced marriage, and therefore a form of 'modern slavery'.

However, as intimated in the previous chapter, the assumption that North Korean women's marriages to Chinese men are always coerced and slavery-like does not precisely match the narratives of my interviewees who married Chinese men. This chapter therefore questions the dominant discourse, and anti-trafficking literature in particular, on 'forced' marriage between North Korean wives and Chinese husbands, and the identification of North Korean wives as 'slaves' based on their own experiences of marriage with Chinese men. The chapter is structured around the five characteristics noted above, bringing the voices of my interviewees into dialogue with these assumptions to show that matters are more complicated than they appear to be in the dominant discourse.

The chapter explores questions about women's consent to marriage; whether human rights violations such as violence or forced labour were present in their marriage, and if so, whether these violations were related to the monetary transaction made by husband during the marriage process; and finally whether human rights violations, violence and such payments can provide a sufficient basis to regard it as 'forced marriage'. Towards the end, I consider my interviewees' own reflections on whether or not they were 'slaves', and whether or not they consider themselves as having been capable of exercising agency in changing or leaving their marriage, possibly through negotiations with their husband. The chapter concludes that the terms 'slave' and 'forced marriage' do not adequately capture my interviewees' situations in China. Before turning to my interviewees' experience of marriage, it is necessarily make some brief remarks about the legal status of North Korean wives in China.

6.2 *Legal status of North Korean wives in China*

According to surveys recently conducted by some NGOs (Quan, 2014), about 30% of North Korean wives are legally registered as such in China, while 70% are not. Amongst my interviewees, eight out of thirty were legally registered which is consistent with these statistics. For foreigners to marry a Chinese national in China, they need to register themselves as foreigners and gain a visa. Since North Koreans cannot register as foreigners having entered illegally, they therefore have to acquire Chinese or Korean-Chinese identity papers, which is achieved through contact with corrupt officials or brokers.

One Chinese missionary I interviewed told me that the Chinese government does not view so-called 'mixed blood' babies, with one Chinese and one foreign parent, kindly. Though in

the past, North Korean women tried to secure fake foreign identity papers, for this reason and also as the surveillance of foreigners in China has tightened, they now prefer to secure fake Chinese identity papers. The fake Chinese identity papers are normally bought by the husband or his family, although one of my interviewees purchased papers herself after earning and saving money for a while. Those Chinese husbands/families who do buy fake papers do so because, having paid for a wife they regard this as a way of protecting their ‘property’, and the loss of a wife means the loss of reproductive, household and farm labour and house work/farming labour. Moreover, if the true nationality of a North Korean wife is revealed, the husband and possibly his family risk being subject to fines or other punishments for assisting an illegal migrant. Finally, there is an incentive to securing fake papers because it will not be possible to register a child from the marriage unless both parents have valid IDs in China.

So far as the 70% of wives who are not registered are concerned, the lack of fake papers is either explained by the fact that their husbands’ families do not have enough money to pay for them, or in some cases, the North Korean wives themselves do not want it since being discovered in possession of such false papers may lead to added or aggravated punishment on repatriation to North Korea. If North Korean wives with fake papers are discovered or reported to the police, their marital status and the registration of their children become invalid, and the wife is repatriated to North Korea, so that whether or not the marriage is registered, North Korean wives remain ‘illegal migrants’ in China, and marriage is not a route to legality.

6.3 Forced or voluntary marriage: a question of consent?

We have seen in Chapter 4 that most of my North Korean women interviewees chose to marry a Chinese man either as a means to migrate into China or as a survival strategy once there. There were also four women who were deceived by smugglers or brokers and ended up in an unwanted marriage. In international law, consent is an important factor in determining whether or not a marriage is forced marriage. According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 16(2)), “marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouse”. These four women who married a Chinese man in China claimed that they did not desire to marry, and were deceived and forced into marriage. They had simply followed their brokers one day, as they would have done on any other day, only to find themselves suddenly left to live with their future grooms. That is how Sunbok ended up married to a Chinese man in a remote village. In her words:

“How can they sell me like a dog? You would not sell even a dog that way. My broker asked me to stay with his cousin and said that he would come back to pick me up after a few days. It was too late when I found out that it was my future husband rather than his cousin and that I had actually been sold to him. The groom’s mother had already paid my broker and asked me to do my job for the money. She pushed me into my husband’s room. She wanted a grandchild between us.”

In the case of the two women mentioned above, it is fairly straightforward to describe the marriages as forced and non-consensual, as these women were not even aware that a marriage was being arranged. Other cases are more complicated, however, since it may be that a woman consents to an arrangement in which a broker will accept payment for her as a bride from a groom’s family. The arrangement appears, from one perspective, as the sale of a woman and so as a form of slavery, yet as noted in the previous chapter, the woman concerned may regard the transaction as the provision of a service that she herself actually wants. Many of my interviewees stated that it was their choice, within the limited options open to them, to marry a Chinese man.

Though legalistic definitions of slavery emphasise the treatment of human beings as objects to be bought, sold and owned as property, a number of scholars have pointed out that these features of slavery do not actually distinguish it from all other social relations - footballers are bought and sold by football clubs, property rights can be exercised over children by parents, and over employees by employers, for example (Patterson, 1982; Brace, 2004). The fact of the monetary exchange between the broker and the groom does not automatically mean that the woman did not consent to the marriage. However, it should equally be noted that the fact of consent is no guarantee against maltreatment, and that people can give consent to arrangements without fully appreciating the nature of the arrangement they are consenting to. Some of my interviewees who consented to marry Chinese grooms nonetheless said that it turned out to be not quite the same as the marriages they had known in North Korea where there is equality between the bride and groom. In fact, all of the twenty-five female interviewees who married in China had previously been married in North Korea and nineteen of them had had a child. Seven of them later married South Korean men after moving to South Korea. Therefore, they could provide rich comparisons between their marriage lives in North Korea and China, and South Korea where relevant. Yunjeong, who had been married to North Korean and then married a Chinese man, said:

“Marriage in China is completely different from that in North Korea. It is not

the usual kind of marriage as it is closely linked to a financial trade. In China, those who are very poor tend to buy North Korean brides because they do not have much a chance with Chinese women. If they marry a North Korean woman, they get the upper hand. For North Korean women who get married this way, however, it is hard to imagine anything romantic such as a love fight, it is hard even to have their own voice in their marriage life.”

Though they had consented to marriage, even actively sought out a broker to effect marriage, my interviewees nonetheless identified ‘being sold’ and ‘being bought’ as the signature difference between their marriages in China and ‘the usual’ kind of marriage in North Korea. Hwasun, commented that:

“Even in South Korea, the men who are in the low socioeconomic status often buy the brides from countries like Cambodia and Thailand etc. It is like that in China. those who are not well off tend to buy North Korean brides.”

Perhaps, what matters more than their original consent to the plan of marriage as a means of migrating is whether or not they had the right to refuse a given husband once they arrived in China. Most said that they could not exercise that right once they were in China because ‘they were sold’ or ‘they were given the right to live in China for the cost of marriage’. They also emphasised that fear that the family-in-law might report them to the police for their illegal status operated as a powerful pressure to maintain the marriage. There were also some interviewees who consented to marry based on false information provided by their broker, and once in China, could not reverse their decision. Jinsuk said she the marriage broker had provided false information about her husband:

“I do not understand how come the broker did not mention that my husband was disabled. I found out about it when I first saw him in his house in China and I was very upset. He was so different from how the broker described him. He was said to be a normal person who had a job. Then I realised that he lied to me to close a deal and get the money. I could not leave and had to live with him though as I had nowhere else to go. It still felt so unfair.”

Most of my interviewees believed that the way in which the marriage was arranged - i.e., they were sold - and their illegal status, which implied the on-going and ever present possibility of repatriation to North Korea, left them in a submissive position in relation to their husband and his family members. They also often remarked that these same factors led to their

exploitation, and violations of their human rights, making their married life into a slavery-like life. And yet they did not identify themselves as actual slaves.

6.4 *Slaves? Abuse and violence in marriage*

Forced labour, domestic violence and sexual abuse are common experiences amongst North Korean women married to Chinese men - they are confined, watched closely as they work, beaten, and threatened in order to make them obey their husbands. Most of my interviewees recall that they experienced some kind of forced labour or labour exploitation in their marriage and described their lives as slavery-like due to the labour conditions they were subjected to. For example, Jeongyun, said:

“I was married to him for eight years during which I worked day and night in the rice paddy and was also in charge of all domestic work at home. There was nothing I gained from it, not even a penny. He simply used me like a slave. Despite my repeatedly asking for some money saying that if I did not send money to my children in North Korea they would starve to death, no matter how hard I cried and begged, he showed no reaction. This must be a slavery-like life, what else could it be, I thought. If he paid just a little bit, it would have made a difference to both my children in North Korea and to how I felt about him.”

Sunjeong stated that:

“Chinese wives do not work in the rice paddy any more when they become pregnant. It did not apply to North Koreans though. When I was pregnant, even the day I gave birth, I still had to work in the field. When everyone else was taking a rest, I had to be out in the field on my own. It is a very sad experience. It made me think that Chinese and North Korean were not the same human beings, we were not treated equally. We were more like domestic slaves. In the old days when there were social classes, working men were the slaves and the comfort was for the masters.

“Work in the rice paddy in addition to taking care of children and all the family members altogether was so demanding. It was physically too tiring. I would wake up at 4 o'clock in the morning, go straight to the paddy and only come home for short meal times. There was not enough time for breaths. The family-in-law still forced me to work saying that they had to make full use of me as they had a debt of 700 pounds to buy me. It did not stop.”

In Sunjeong's case, her family-in-law wanted to take advantage of her labour regarding her as property that they bought and owned. On the other hand, there are some cases where the same rationale of ownership led Chinese husbands to take the exact opposite approach towards their wife - because they regarded their wife as their own property, they felt it necessary to take good care of her and not let her work so hard. There appear to be two reasons for this - first, they did not want their wives to run away, and second, they did not want to damage their property. Jin-suk, who married a Chinese man and stayed in China for ten years said her husband did not make her work but rather confined her to the house so that she would not run away:

“He kept an eye on me as if I was a property. He did not make me work but his constant attention was another form of torture which lasted until the day I left China. He would follow me wherever I went - kitchen, toilet, the field and so on. There was a weekly market in the town and he was concerned that I would save up money and run away so he would ask his sister to go with me to the market.”

There are some cases where the husbands would go one step further and protect their wife as their precious property. Kyung-suk, who was married to a Chinese man for eight years, said her husband spent all the assets that he had saved up for nearly fifty years in order to buy her. In other words, she was all he had and he was concerned about her wellbeing every moment. His family did not want her to leave either and thus treated her well. They even asked their neighbours to welcome and treat her well so that they would not report her to the police. It is perhaps not surprising that Kyung-suk later had a motive to bring her Chinese husband to South Korea after she moved to and settled in the country. As she put it:

“I was all he owned. He saved up around a thousand pounds over nearly fifty years and spent it all just to buy me. He was concerned about me all the time. Even in the paddy field, he would work but I would just sit aside watching him. Even in the house, he did not ask me to do any domestic work - cooking, washing, cleaning - none of it.”

Whether wives are asked to work or not, they are still treated as property of some form by husbands. And though husbands, when they displeased with their wives, often threatened to report them to the police, it was an empty threat and none of the husbands of my female interviewees did so. Moreover, in case that a neighbour reported a wife to the authorities,

the husband's entire family would usually try to protect her, sometimes even fleeing together with her. Yun-jeong said:

“It was relatively safe in the village. It was a family resident village so everyone was a member of the big family. On one hand, everyone knew that I was a wife from North Korea. On the other hand, no one in the village would report me to the police so I felt safe as long as I stayed in the village. Of course, there was always a possibility that someone from outside could find out about me and report me to the police.”

In the respect that they are often protected as property, it could be argued that North Korean wives resemble chattel slaves. And yet unlike chattel slaves in most slave societies historically, they are not legally ascribed the status of slave, or even wife, so that their standing in relation to the state differs significantly from that of chattel slaves. Their ‘owners’ cannot appeal to the state to protect their property rights in these wives, in fact, the reverse - should the wife come to the attention of the authorities, the ‘owner’ will be deprived of his property and may even be subject to criminal sanctions.

Another factor that contributes to the sense that North Korean wives lead a slavery-like existence is the prevalence of domestic violence. In this regards, Su-yeon said:

“When I first realised that I was sold, I could not stand it and just ran away. I did not know the roads around me and ended up going around in circles several times. The countryside all looked alike. In the end, I was found by my husband's family members and harshly beaten until I passed out. They might have thought that I was dead - when I woke up, I was rolled up in a duvet. After that, my husband would not hesitate to beat me when he was not happy with me. You can think of a slave in novels if you want to know what my life was like then.”

My interviewees also reported sexual abuse, In-suk said:

“You need to feel something towards each other to sleep with your husband. He did not care and, even if I did not want to, he forced me to. He threatened to kill me when I refused. Then, there was no way out of it. I just told myself that I was dead. I was an eighty percent dead person. As I look back my life then, it is not of a rightful human being, I was just a slave.”

Yun-jeong also shared her experience of domestic and sexual abuse:

“No matter how unbearable it was, I had to survive. My Chinese husband was simply inhumane. I tried to communicate with him but there was no sensible response. I would only respond to his sexual desire just to survive. I was living as an object, not as a human being. He was assertive and even forceful at times. He thought that he could do whatever he wanted with me because he bought me. It is not having enough to eat but having liberty that makes your life human. In that sense, my life was nothing but that of a slave.”

The absence of liberty, which Yun-Jeong described as inhuman, was also discussed by some other interviewees. In Chapter 3, one of the dominant reasons for my interviewees' initial border crossing to China was hunger. At that point, the inability to satisfy the basic biological need for food was the most unbearable part of their life in North Korea. Once in China, when this biological need was fulfilled, their perceptions of what dehumanized them shifted. -As well as hard labour, sexual abuse and the lack of liberty, my interviewees often spoke of suffering due to a lack of social contacts with other people and/or a lack of fair treatment in China.

Women's bodies and reproductive functions are also potential objects of abuse in North Korean women's married lives. Several interviewees spoke of how the decision to have a child or not was made by their husband or his family exclusively. Kyung-sin, who married a Chinese man in 2004 had to have two babies and said:

“In the beginning of our marriage, his family asserted that I had to have a baby and the baby had to be a boy because my husband was the eldest son.¹ I had two daughters straight in a row. Because of the one-child policy in China, the family were waiting for the son that they wanted to register as the only child in the family. That meant no registration for my daughters. I had already had three children in North Korea and I was getting old so I did not want to have another baby but they kept insisting.”

Another interviewee, Mira, on the other hand, was forced not to give birth:

“I thought they would expect me to give birth as that is what I used to hear from people in the countryside of North Korea - married couples are encouraged to have babies. But the Chinese husband I married already had a son so he did not ask me to have a baby. I wanted it though as I still was not legally registered

¹ In the Confucianism culture, the eldest son inherits most and descendance through the eldest son in each generation is often considered to be novel.

and I thought the mother of a Chinese baby would be more secure in China. When he found out that I was pregnant, he was concerned about a baby with an unregistered mother, and took me straight to the hospital. He mentioned some check-ups and, with my limited Chinese, I did not know exactly what was happening but, when all the medical tests were done, it turned out that I had just had an abortion.

“Then, after a while, he must have heard that a baby was a good way to prevent women from running away and so he took me to the hospital again. They took the contraceptive loop from my womb. I did not even know that it was there inside my body. It must have been planted when I had the abortion. My Chinese was that limited - when they spoke in Chinese, I had no clue.

“During my marriage, I was running a business as a host family for students and earned quite a bit of money. I only later realised that the sister in law was afraid of my leaving the house just because I was managing all the business in the house. It made me so upset. What gave her the right to decide whether I have a baby or not, or whether to put the contraceptive loop into my body without my consent? What made me more sad and disappointed was that if I had not been running the business or if I had not been earning anything, they would not have cared whether I had a baby or not.”

Appalling as my interviewees’ experience of sexual, physical and psychological violence was, that experience alone cannot be used to draw a line between them as victims of ‘forced marriage’ and all other wives around the world who have not been forced into marriage. Such violence and abuse in married life can be present even in “voluntary heterosexual marriage of the type sanctioned in contemporary Western societies”, as O’Connell Davidson puts it (2015:87).

6.5 *Slave or non-slave*

In the previous section, it was noted that my interviewees often described their life in China as slavery-like and even called themselves slaves. Yet they also rejected the idea that they were, in fact, slaves. Many interviewees actually said: ‘I lived like a slave but I was not a slave.’ This seeming contradiction of ‘living like a slave without being a slave’ in their narratives arises from the fact it was important to them to acknowledge their own agency in choosing such life in China in order to escape from North Korea. In this section, I will discuss how

North Korean women sought to empower themselves in their constrained situations and how they exercised their own agency. It helps us to understand why they do not view themselves as having been actual slaves. When many interviewees described their slavery-like life in China during the interview, I would ask, 'Do you regard yourself as having been a slave?' Their response was typically one of the following three:

"I lived like a slave but was not a slave. Although I was sold to them, after all it was me who wanted and decided to come. No one dragged me here." (Miseon)

"Even though I was sold to my husband, I was not his possession. Slaves will always be slaves but, since I came to South Korea, I am no longer a slave any more. I am not in a slavery-like situation anymore." (Jeongyun)

"I worked like a slave but was actually not a slave. There were times when I was forced to work but I chose to obey their order because of my illegal status, because I did not want to be arrested or repatriated. I was by no means enslaved or under a life-or-death obligation." (Sunjeong)

Those who responded either in the first or third way chose to marry, or chose to be sold into marriage with, a Chinese man to escape from North Korea. In other words, what would be described in dominant discourse as trafficking for forced marriage was the strategy they chose for movement and survival. Sunjeong, who was often beaten by her Chinese husband, expresses the contradiction of violence that is chosen in this way:

"Who would want to be beaten? That said, he was the only route for me to live in China."

There are also some interviewees who initially escaped to China not through marriage, and subsequently chose marriage as a preferable route to survival. Jeongyun describes her experience as follows:

"When I escaped to China for the first time, it did not take too long before I was caught and sent back to North Korea. I then realised that there was nothing to keep me safe in China and I was scared to go there again without protection. It then occurred to me that if I married someone, his family would protect me. So when I escaped to China for the second time, I did it through marriage. I did not want to be arrested or sent back to North Korea again."

Yun shared a similar experience:

“I was clueless and easily caught while walking around in my first attempt. When I escaped the for second time, I knew the husband’s family would protect me and I would then be safe, I thought, so I decided to marry a Chinese man.”

Marriage in China can thus be chosen as a deliberate strategy for safer migration. And because Chinese men are also at risk if they are discovered to have illegally married a North Korean woman, though they may threaten their wife to control her, when the police actually come to their place, they normally hide their wife in a safe place. The fact of illegality on both sides makes it mutually advantageous to protect the North Korean wife from the authorities.

However, it should also be noted that women’s motives for maintaining their marriage were not always or only rooted in a self-interested desire for protection from the authorities. Jeong-suk, who as was described above was deceived into marrying a disabled man explained that:

“When I first realised that I was deceived and sold to a disabled man, it was miserable. As we spent time together though, he was a nice person and kind to me. When I was thinking of moving to South Korea, while everyone else in his family was against it and kept an eye on me, he said nothing against and let me go. During my journey to South Korea, I cried a lot as I could still see him giving me money and saying goodbye to me. I do not know how I feel about him as a man or as a husband, but I feel sorry for him and pity him.”

Suk-hee even brought her husband from China after escaping to South Korea and said:

“He would often beat me especially when he was drunk. It was a hard time for me. Still, I could not live in China without him. I had to pay him back for it and, when I settled down in South Korea, I naturally came to think of him. In a sense, I wanted to look after him this time just like he hid and protected me in China.”

Yun-jeong who also brought her Chinese husband to South Korea said:

“It was not exactly the kind of marriage I wanted. Still, affection grew towards my husband as I spent more time with him and, when I left for South Korea, I could not stop crying. I almost gave up my plan for South Korea at one point but one of the neighbours who was a North Korean woman got arrested and repatriated which scared me so I had to leave.”

She also had a husband and children in North Korea, yet decided to bring her Chinese husband and a child born in China to South Korea. As can be seen in this case, though most North Korean women bring their origin family in North Korea once they settle down in the South, there are also cases where they bring their new Chinese family. Among the twenty-five female interviewees who married a Chinese man, four of them have brought their husband and child from China and two of them even brought some of his family members - mother-in-law, sisters and brothers-in-law to South Korea.

Protection and report/accusation are two sides of the same blade. People who know and protect the North Korean women are also the ones who could potentially report them to the police. While none of my interviewees were reported by their family-in-law or by neighbours, the possibility was always there as a threat in the back of their mind. For that reason, they always had to be very careful in their relations with people around them.

In the words of Yun-jeong:

“Relations with the family-in-law was important, especially with the mother-in-law. I always tried to have good relations with the neighbours too. If something went wrong, they could always report me. Who knew and when, so I did not want to trigger any possibility of it. In the neighbouring village, there was another North Korean woman with whom I became fairly close. She did not keep good relations with her mother-in-law who in the end reported her and so she was arrested.”

She continued:

“When I heard about it, it made me feel very concerned. I thought that it could happen to me any moment.”

They could be seen and reported while at home or in the village. Or, even if everyone in the same village could be trusted, there were many cases where people from another village would report them or the women were identified and arrested at public places such as the train station. In general, North Korean women gradually acquire by experience over the course of two to three years the knowledge that even marriage to a Chinese man cannot be an everlasting solution for them.

Those who married to migrate, when they experience (domestic) violence, forced labour and (sexual) abuse in their marriage, typically show the following two responses over time. In the early months of their marriage, they almost blindly tolerate the circumstances. However, over a period of two to three years, as seen in Yun-jeong's case, they gradually realise that

marriage is not even a perfect cover for them and begin to question whether they have to keep enduring it and so to modify their strategy. Such modifications tend to take place earlier for those who have been repatriated to North Korea than those without - they are probably more alert to the precarious nature of their security. The narrative of Suk-hee, illustrated this:

“I had to do something quickly. I did not want to wait until I was arrested and sent back again. It was scary and I had to flee to South Korea as quickly as I could.”

By the end of the third year of marriage, all my married female interviewees came to the conclusion that they needed to end their marriage. Nonetheless, depending on their circumstances, it took a wide range of time periods from as short as a few months to as long as fifteen years for them to execute their decision to leave their husband. What preparations did they do during this period? Answers to this question show how they exercised their agency within their highly limited and constrained positions.

The first step of their preparation was to gain trust from people around them in order to reduce the amount of surveillance that would otherwise hinder their movement. The primary target was, of course, their husband and his family. To this end, many of my interviewees utilized a common belief in the Chinese community that mothers do not run away from their children. Some were aware and made use of this belief from the beginning while others became acquainted with it at a later point after giving birth. Regardless of when they came it across, having a baby was regarded as an effective way in which to gain the trust of their husband and his family.

Mijin, who married a Chinese man when she was 22 years old, was one of the former, and thus wanted to have a baby to be in a better position within the family. She explained:

“It was about one year after we got married. I happened to watch a story about North Koreans living in South Korea on a Chinese TV programme by accident. Since then, I always thought of going to South Korea but had no clue how to do it. The attention from my family-in-law to me was constant and intense so I was not confident in getting away from it. Then, I thought I needed a baby. Especially in the countryside, no one could imagine that the mother of a child would run away. Some of the married female neighbours also hinted that you tend to be treated better once you have a baby.”

Mijin did manage to give birth to a child and, after that, surveillance by her family-in-law did indeed relax. She then started to search for other North Koreans around her village to

see if there were other ways in which she could carry on her life in China without relying on her marriage. After patiently going through a complex network of brokers, she found one broker² in a restaurant and this led to her successful migration to South Korea three years later.

A few other interviewees were also able to leave their husbands after giving birth as they were watched less. In-suk said:

“There were two other North Korean women in the village but my family-in-law did not allow me to meet with them - perhaps they were concerned that I might leave them once I got some companions. My family-in-law would lock the door from outside when I was on my own at home and their families-in-law also watched them closely so as for us not to get together. This would change once I had a son about three years after the marriage.”

She could then go out a little more freely and meet with the other two North Korean women in the village. She managed to find a broker through them and finally to move to South Korea.

These are cases of evading detection. There are other cases where my interviewees managed to persuade their husbands, still making tactical use of their child. This is how Kyung-sin, fled to South Korea. When she entered her fifth year of marriage, she was visited by another North Korean woman who used to live in the same village and who had become a broker after settling and acquiring citizenship in South Korea. She suggested and encouraged Kyung-sin, to move to South Korea. Kyung-sin, wanted to go to South Korea but also wanted to live there with her Chinese husband, so tried to persuade him:

“I told him that I wanted to quit the life of a criminal and to go to South Korea to live my life more freely as a citizen there, not restricted in any way. The broker also said that I could invite my husband once I settled in South Korea with a citizenship so I told him about it. He did not seem to believe me at first, and I asked, what if we had a baby and I became the mother of his child? He began to warm to the idea and, when I was about six-months pregnant, he agreed and paid my broker’s fee. He probably thought that six-months of pregnancy was enough to avoid the possibility of an abortion. He even took me to the city where I was supposed to meet with the broker.”

² Finding a suitable broker is another important variable in a successful migration to China and finally to South Korea and it tends to happen by chance as it is an illegal activity in China. For Mijin, it took about three years to find a broker but it could take less or more.

Unfortunately, it was the middle of a very severe winter and Kyung-sin suffered frostbite while making the border crossing through the mountains, and ended up losing eight of her toes. The tragedy extended further, for she gave stillbirth to the baby during this period. Nonetheless, she made it to South Korea and, when settled in, brought her husband from China as promised and they are now living together in Seoul.

Some interviewees managed to separate from their husbands in other ways, without having a baby or mentioning a life in South Korea. In the third year of her marriage, Jin-suk noticed that, her husband was having an affair with his brother's wife. She did not wish to continue her marriage in that way and asked for a deal with his husband, based on her husband's usual philosophy that marriage was some kind of trade:

"My husband was having an affair with his brother's wife. I told him that I was leaving. He asked me for the three hundred pounds which he paid to buy me. I told him that he should not be looking for that money from me as I had never seen it, and also told him to do the calculations properly. I don't know how much they pay for a girl in a brothel, but I asked him to pay me for two and a half years at the standard rate. Also, I asked him to pay me for all the work I had done for him, for the children and for his family, counting the number of days I'd lived with him. I then asked him to divide in half the possessions acquired through our work from the rice paddy, since we had both worked together for them. I said I would pay him three hundred pounds once he paid me the right amount for all he owed me. He was lost for words. He probably never imagined that I would react that way."

Jin-suk divorced with his husband and got a job in a restaurant. However, there were frequent patrols near the restaurant so she could not work there for long and finally quit to marry another Chinese man.

The babies North Korean women have with their Chinese husbands can also be another motive for moving to South Korea. The one-child policy has been abolished only recently so, when my interviewees lived in China, they could register only one child per household. If they gave birth to a daughter or to more than one child, not all of them were registered. This meant the unregistered children became stateless. They were neither Chinese nor North Korean. However, if they moved to South Korea, they would be recognized as North Korean since their mother is, and this opens up a possibility for them to obtain legitimate citizenship of South Korea.

6.6 Conclusion

The dominant discourse that depicts North Korean women border crossers as victims of trafficking and modern day slaves does not fully grasp the experiences described by my interviewees. In particular, what appear as the five pillars of North Korean women's marriage to Chinese men that are assumed in anti-trafficking and antislavery discourse - namely, the absence of consent, human rights violations in marriage, monetary purchase of wives, self-identification as 'slaves', and slave-like situations that strip them of all agency - all appear more complicated and ambiguous in the narratives of my interviewees.

Coercion is rarely a feature of any stage in the matchmaking process. Unlike the portrayal in the campaign literature, my interviewees were not forced into marriage by means of physical violence or kidnapping, although there was sometimes an element of deceit. Three of my interviewees went to their future groom's house without being informed about the marriage arrangement and a few other interviewees, while they were aware they were to marry, had been ill-informed about their partners. Those who were unaware could still sometimes refuse the marriage when they found out about it, and some of them in fact left to find a job instead. Thus, despite the aspect of deceit, it is fair to say that on the whole, there was consent in relation to the marriage itself.

Despite their consent, marriage led to very hostile circumstances for many of my interviewees. In this respect, their experience fits with the description of North Korean women as slaves in the dominant discourse that focuses on their experience of forced labour, domestic violence and sexual abuse as means of control in marriage. And yet there is also much variation in the experiences described by my interviewees, with some of them having consented to marriages that proved extremely violent and abusive, and others having consented to marriages in which they did not experience violence, sexual abuse, or even, in some cases, labour exploitation.

In anti-trafficking discourse, the monetary transactions between Chinese grooms and brokers are represented as the sale and purchase of wives, and it is assumed that Chinese husbands' sense of ownership in relation to their North Korean wives inevitably leads to the violent control of such wives (Davis, 2006; Kim et al., 2009; Kim J, 2010). While this link was indeed present for some of my interviewees, it could result in quite the opposite behaviour in other cases, i.e. the Chinese husband would take good care of the wife imagined as his precious 'property'. It is also worth noting that romance and love could feature in these supposedly purely economic and slave-like marriages. Five of thirty female interviewees eventually brought their Chinese husband to South Korea, as they felt strong affective ties

to them. My data suggests it is necessary to re-examine the simplistic assumption that the economic basis of marriages between Chinese men and North Korean women automatically generates violence, abuse and exploitation. My interview data highlights the variability and complexity of the relationships between North Korean women and Chinese men brought together by matchmaking brokerage.

The conventional view of marriages between North Korean women and Chinese men as forced marriage and modern slavery does not fully grasp my interviewees' experience, primarily because it neglects these women's agency. North Korean women's statements to the effect that they were treated as slaves by their husbands are taken at face value, while their equally forceful statements about their choice to migrate from North Korea are glossed over and ignored.

In the context of migration studies more generally, critics have often observed that conceptualisations of migrants as mere victims fails to capture and explain migrants' agency (McKay, 2007). Likewise, the dominant discourse that depicts North Korean women simply as victims of trafficking fails to engage with the complexity of their experience.

If the concept of agency is understood as the ability for individuals to act independently and to make their own choices between the options available to them, however limited, then through their migration, my interviewees exercised agency. They chose marriage as a strategy for mobility and used marriage as a means of protection, one that allowed them to hide their illegality in China. In addition, they showed their agency by directly opposing their husbands when subject to human rights violations within their marriage and/or by leaving their husbands to find paid work or to move to South Korea. The presence of their agency does not necessarily mean the absence of structural constraints and I do not intend to overlook the latter when emphasising the former. Lister (2004:126) states that "agency does not operate in a vacuum; rather it is located in a dialectic relationship with social structures and is embedded in the context of social, economic and political relations." My North Korean women interviewees exercised their agency through their struggles and negotiations with structural forces such as forcible repatriation and illegal status, which put them in an extraordinarily vulnerable position. It further shows that they managed to eventually escape these structural constraints by the persistent exercise of their agency.

7. WORKERS OR SLAVES? NKES WORKING IN CHINA AND RUSSIA

7.1 *Introduction*

North Koreans who work abroad are commonly described as ‘Slaves’ or ‘Modern slaves’. According to the U.S. State Department’s latest Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report (2017, 336-7p), North Koreans working in Russia are “victims of labour trafficking” who labour in “slave-like conditions” in labour camps. In addition, the media report that North Korean workers have been dispatched to foreign countries in Europe, North America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia where they are subject to human rights violations, poor working environments and labour exploitation. Some governments, humanitarian organizations and human rights groups have therefore urged receiving countries to address these issues, with concern particularly focused on Russia as North Koreans have been sent to work at logging sites there since 1967. The number of North Korean workers in these sites started to increase significantly from the 1980s, and there are currently estimated to be some 50,000 North Korean logging workers in Russia. This is more than 80% of the entire overseas workforce in such Russian logging sites, which are infamous for their appalling working conditions and environments, and often considered to be the worst of the foreign worksites to which North Korean workers are assigned. Logging workers work on average 12-13 hours per day, receiving only 20-30% of the wages received by Russian workers doing the same job. Even so, about 90% of their salaries are paid directly to the North Korean regime as ‘tax’. It is because North Koreans work such long hours for such low wages that media and humanitarian groups accuse the Russian government of “using North Korean slave labour” (BBC, 2015).

It is not just North Korean workers in Russia who are portrayed as slaves and victims of forced labour. North Korean refugees in China have also been described as enduring ‘slave-like’ working conditions and environments in official documents including governmental publications. In its review of the serious human rights problems faced by North Koreans in China (including forced marriage as well as forced labour), the TIP Report (ibid, 126-8) criticised all forms of trafficking involving North Koreans. The illegal status of North Koreans in China is believed to be the primary factor allowing for various forms of exploitation and

slavery-like practices. In other words, whether North Koreans are working legally in foreign countries (as in the case of loggers in Russia) or illegally (as in the case of those who make the unauthorized crossing into China and then find work), North Korean migrants are commonly represented as victims of trafficking, forced labour, and modern slavery. In recent years, however, different opinions that challenge these dominant narratives are emerging (Kim S, 2014). Some now argue that a more effective way of promoting and protecting the human rights of North Koreans is to define them as migrant workers, and claim their corresponding labour rights. Such commentators emphasise the fact that many North Koreans have chosen to move to China or to work in Russia, and should therefore be classified as migrant workers.

Thus, in the current literature there is a tendency to represent North Koreans, whether in Russia or China, in a binary fashion as either victims of forced labour and modern slaves, or as migrant workers who move and labour voluntarily, albeit that they lack rights and protections when they do so. Again, my interview data does not neatly fit with either of these visions. This chapter presents research data that points to a contradiction. My North Korean interviewees voluntarily chose highly exploitative forms of labour and employment relations. The complexities of their lived experience reveals the limitations of approaches that dichotomize freedom and slavery, voluntary and forced labour, migration and trafficking. Drawing on this data, the chapter also criticises the policy and legal concepts built upon these dichotomies, which fail to explain or respond to the reality of North Koreans' lives. In describing the experience of North Korean workers in Russia and China, the chapter illustrated the the contradictions of the forced-or-voluntary dichotomy identified by Betts and Kaytaz (2009), lending empirical support to their call for a wider framework. Focusing on their work experience in both China and Russia, the chapter and explores whether the specific elements of labour exploitation can justify their classification as slaves. It compares the dominant discourse in which they appear as slaves against the actual experiences of North Korean workers amongst my interviewees, and analyse the similarities and differences between them. The chapter first looks at North Korean workers in Russia, then at North Korean workers in China, and finally considers the two sets of experience jointly to inform a more general discussion of their labour rights and human rights.

7.2 *Slaves or migrant workers in Russia?*

In an interview with the media in 2017, Greg Scarlatoiu, Executive Director of the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, said that the North Korean government claimed to have sent about 60,000 workers to approximately 20 other countries including

Russia, Kuwait, Mongolia, China, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Algeria to list a few in decreasing order of significance in terms of the number of North Korean workers involved. Of these, nearly half or more than 50,000 are engaged in forestry and construction in Russia where they work as loggers (Radio Free Asia, 2017). Since 1980, the North Korean government has been heavily dependent on countries in the communist and former communist bloc, an example of which is Russia, which supplies North Korea with electricity and gas and receives forestry workers in return for such support. In particular, after the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994 and during Kim Jong-il's regime, the number of North Korean loggers in Russia increased to nearly 10,000. Since Kim Jong-un became the leader in 2011, it quickly expanded to 50,000 by 2017 (CNN, 2018). These 50,000 North Korean migrant workers in Russia are commonly portrayed as slaves in Western and humanitarian reports for the following reasons: Firstly, their working conditions are very poor; secondly, there is exploitation of their labour; and finally, North Koreans are described as subject to forced labour in the sense that they do not have a choice about whether they work or not.

The working environment for North Korean workers in Russia does not always comply with basic labour rights and human rights agreed in international law. This is related to the characteristics of the logging and construction industries in which most North Koreans work. According to the narratives of North Korean workers interviewed by one NGO (Kim and Burt, 2015), even the basics needs of the loggers are not fulfilled and the fact that they are usually extremely isolated, living and working in the depths of the forests, makes it even more difficult for them to obtain food. Most of them are seriously malnourished, being provided with only a small ration of dried fish and canned beans to eat. Also, they are housed in metal containers rather than proper houses with no heating facilities nor air conditioning, and it is very difficult for them to cope with high temperatures, humidity and mosquitoes in the summer, or with the biting cold air in winter. Furthermore, North Koreans are not protected at work. The safety equipment and facilities is often inadequate so they are exposed to serious injuries, and in a context where no medical support of any form is provided. If they get hurt while working, there is no insurance and they are responsible for paying fees for any medical treatments they manage to access. Moreover, if they miss working hours, or the quality of their work suffers as a result of their need for medical treatment or hospitalization, deductions are accordingly made from their salaries. In addition, if they are so seriously injured that they can no longer work efficiently, then they are sent back to North Korea. Finally, the extended working hours - of about 12-13 hours per day - add significantly to their poor and challenging circumstances. Such appalling working conditions lead some

commentators to describe these North Korean workers as providing slave-like labour (US State Department, 2017) and as being basically in the situation of slaves (New York Times, 2017).

Besides their dreadful working conditions, the degree to which their labour is exploited is another reason why they are described as slaves and victims of forced labour. In most cases, wages are not paid promptly but rather delayed by a year or two and, in some cases, not until they go back to North Korea. Moreover, most of them only receive 10% of their wages with a significant portion of the remaining 90% going to Kim Jong-un in the name of national planning/budget, while some is taken by loyalty funds and taxes commanded by senior overseas employment officials in North Korea. It is impossible to avoid these salary deductions since it is run with a withholding system where the wages are paid to the North Korean government/officials and not directly to the individual worker. North Korean refugee NGOs describe this form of work as a system of indentured servitude and also claim that North Korean overseas workers should be classified as ‘slaves owned by the nation’ (PSCR, 2015). Concerns have also been expressed that the earnings of such workers are used to support North Korea’s nuclear and/or missile development programmes, Kim Jong-un’s and senior officials’ extravagances, and to bankroll Pyongyang’s construction boom, adding to the perception of North Korean overseas workers as state-owned slaves (Telegraph, 2015).

Many groups of migrant workers in both global north and global south countries, and in countries with liberal democratic as well as authoritarian governments, are known to experience appalling working conditions and extreme labour exploitation (see, for example, O’Connell Davidson, 2015; Anderson, 2000). However, what is more unique about the situation of North Korean workers in Russia is that the North Korean government monitors them in various ways, even though they are on foreign soil, often compelling them to work for extensive hours. This close surveillance essentially keeps them in a state of invisible captivity, and in this sense, their work is often regarded as ‘forced’ by the state. In addition, the North Korean government does not allow overseas workers to possess any identity documents since they would then be in a position to flee. Any IDs including their passports are removed from them immediately upon their arrival in Russia.

The North Korean government has also set up a surveillance department to dispatch spies to overseas labour sites to observe workers, not merely checking that they do not escape from the territory, but also monitoring them to see whether they go to church, learn ‘South Korean ideologies’, or manage to find work in a company other than that arranged by the government. North Koreans who worked in Russia and did manage to escape have reported that spies

from the surveillance department are disguised and mix in amongst ordinary workers, so that they always had to be on their guard in case a co-worker should prove to be a North Korean government agent. If discovered and reported, neglect of work as well as unapproved breaks away from the labour sites could lead to interrogation and torture in prison, after which it is decided whether to send the worker back to work or to repatriate him North Korea. Indeed, the North Korean government operates its own prisons in some foreign countries including Russia, the main purpose of which is to hold overseas workers whilst determining where to send them after interrogation rather than to detain them for a long period of time. There are two types of prisons - one on site and the other a security prison remote from the labour site. Both are described by those who have experienced them as comprised of a small confined space of about one square meter and as being equipped with CCTV and guard dogs (Yoon and Lee, 2015).

North Korean workers who are caught trying to escape to South Korea whilst on work placement in Russia are repatriated and sent to prison in North Korea to experience what was described in Chapter 3. Since collective punishment is employed in North Korea, the family members of such workers are also likely to be punished, albeit to a different extent. In this regard, it is worth noting that even if overseas workers are detained or punished on relatively minor terms for the neglect of work, their families will still suffer, since the deductions are made from their salaries.

Through such rigorous monitoring and punishments, the North Korean government controls from afar the workers they send overseas. For all these reasons, human rights groups view such overseas labour as a form of forced or slave labour and often draw parallels with the gulags that existed in Stalinist Russia.

Does the term ‘forced labour’ really capture their experience? My interviewees did not necessarily regard it as such. Chul-ho, who worked as a logger in Russia for 13 years, describes it as voluntary rather than forced labour:

“I went to Russia in 2000 for the first time, worked there for two years and came back. I volunteered to go again in 2005. Actually, I had to pay a lot of bribes to be selected for the squad. If someone is chosen to work in Russia, then the chances are 9 out of 10 that he must have bribed a senior official. Otherwise, the chance of being selected is very slim.”

Another logger, Sang-chul, who worked in Russia for 10 years likewise spoke of this as a welcome opportunity for him:

“It’s a real chance to make money. No matter how much you pay in taxes to the country, you still earn at least 30 times more than what you could get in North Korea. There are no such opportunities in [North Korea], where you are just given the work associated with the blood/class you are born with. Once you go to Russia, you are guaranteed to earn more.”

They admit that the living and working environment was appalling and that surveillance and punishment were tough in Russia, but add that it was still somewhat better than the situation in North Korea. Chul-ho reflects on this as follows.

“My life in Russia was better, or at least not worse than in North Korea. Even inside North Korea, you are still monitored closely, or even more stringently by surveillance officers and security guards and so on. In Russia, at least you can earn money for it. I would not ask for more.”

They do not dispute the fact that conditions for North Koreans in Russia are poor and challenging, but nonetheless insist they were not forced, but chose to go there. This element of choice leads some human rights groups to argue that framing such workers as migrant workers rather than forced labourer or slaves would make it easier to advocate for the rights that in theory ought to accrue to them as such (Amnesty, 2018). And yet the rights afforded to temporary migrant workers are very constrained everywhere in the world, and it is hard to see how these minimal rights would address the particular situation of North Korean overseas workers. Temporary migrant work visas almost invariably tie the worker to the employer that sponsors them. They are in theory free to quit their employment, but in most cases, having done so they are required to return home as they have no right to move freely in the receiving country’s labour market (Anderson, 2013; O’Connell Davidson, 2015). In Russia too, North Korean workers are only legally present when they live and work at the logging or construction site they have been assigned to, and become irregular or ‘illegal’ migrants if they leave the labour sites. Again, what distinguishes the North Korean overseas worker from migrant workers from other countries is the fact that their own government takes an active part in -policing them whilst working abroad, investigating and monitoring them and, when deemed necessary, forcibly repatriating them. Upon repatriation, they are sent to labour camps in North Korea for years.

Despite this close surveillance and the threat of dire punishment, some of my interviewees did escape from their designated workplaces and secure employment with another company. As a result of their illegal status, they had to be constantly alert to avoid detection not just

by the Russian immigration authorities, but also by their own government as well. Illegality is stressful for all migrants, but perhaps especially so for North Koreans who know the enormity of the punishment that will await them if discovered. It severely limited all aspects of their life in Russia, and, as a result, most of the interviewees who took this route ended up deciding to move to South Korea. Typically, they secretly got in touch with the South Korean embassy in Russia and, with the help of UNHCR, which recognises them as refugees, moved to South Korea via Germany.

In summary, my interviews with North Koreans who had worked in Russia prior to migrating to South Korea suggest that it is inaccurate to describe North Korean workers in Russia as forced labourers, since they voluntarily and actively seek opportunities to work abroad. However, it is equally inadequate to lump them into the more general category of ‘migrant worker’, since the restraints on their freedom are even greater than those experienced by temporary migrant workers from most other countries, even those who are subject to equally hazardous, oppressive and exploitative conditions. Unlike Nepalese migrants working in construction under the kafala system in the Gulf, for example, North Koreans in Russia are constantly monitored and controlled by their own state, in addition to their sponsors and the immigration authorities of the receiving state. Moreover, where temporary migrant workers from other countries are in theory, if not in practice, free to quit their employment and return home, North Koreans do not even enjoy this abstract freedom. They know that if they displease their employer, or attempt to leave their employment, they will suffer horribly at the hands of their own government. The conventional dichotomies of ‘forced or voluntary’ and of ‘slaves or migrant workers’ cannot capture the complexities of North Korean workers’ experience in Russia.

7.3 *Slaves or irregular migrant workers in China?*

According to official policy documents and government publications, North Koreans in Russia have been forced to labour by the North Korean government and they are consequently categorised as slaves. Likewise, in the dominant narratives, North Koreans who work in China are described as slaves who are subject to forced labour and to slavery-like working conditions such as wage exploitation, confinement and assault for their illegal status and the possibility of forced repatriation (Rim, 2016).

My own research data did indeed find that the illegal status of North Koreans in China is often the central element compelling them to endure human rights violations such as exploitative labour, because the fear of being reported and forcibly repatriated is far greater

than the misery of continuing to be exploited and abused. However, my research data also suggests that it is inaccurate and unhelpful to jump from here to the conclusion that they are therefore ‘modern slaves’ subject to ‘forced labour’. In particular, in the case of interviewees who stayed in China for more than 3 years, most appear to have voluntarily chosen to move to China to improve their life and state that it was also their own choice to endure exploitative labour. With an emphasis on the ‘voluntary’ or chosen aspect of their work, the second section of this chapter illustrates the limitations of dominant policy categories used to classify migrant experience, while also drawing attention to the human rights violations that arise from North Koreans status as illegal immigrants in China.

7.3.1 *Criminals and irregular workers in the shadows*

“Migrants, notably those in an irregular situation, tend to live and work in the shadows, and so to be afraid to complain about maltreatment, denied rights and freedoms, and disproportionately vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and marginalization.” (OHCHR, 2014) The lives of North Korean escapees who live in China as irregular migrants are no different. In fact, the possibility of forcible repatriation to North Korea is so terrifying that their lives are constrained in many ways. Miseon described her fear of repatriation whilst in China as follows:

It was horrendous when I was sent back to North Korea [the first time]. As I imagined the possibility of being sent back again, I thought I would rather die and, since that moment, I was willing to do whatever I could not to be caught. I even began sleeping in my shoes so that I could run away anytime I needed to.

Mira described her fear in a similar way:

“I heard that someone had reported me to the police. I had to stay away at relatives’ house for 10 days or even for a month. While I was working in the rice paddy, if I heard the police were coming for me, I would run off to the mountains and stay there for two or three days on my own.”

The apprehension of those who had already experienced repatriation to North Korea was far greater than that of those who had never been returned to suffer in the camps. Therefore, and especially in the case of women with such experience, they would prepare a hiding place not just outside the house but also inside so that they could easily cover themselves when the police were patrolling. Kyung-sin, a woman who escaped from North Korea in 2004 and stayed in China for 8 years with her Chinese husband, said:

“I had to hide several times a day. If the policemen were seen from a distance, I would hide as quickly as I could and would not move at all. There were empty wardrobes, empty baskets, a potato cave, big pots, etc. in the house, and I would go into one of these even at the sight of the shadow of the police.”

Yun-jeong likewise explained:

“The potato caves are normally outside the house. In the Chinese countryside, you dig such a hole under the ground to store potatoes and sweet potatoes over the winter. Those holes are actually quite deep and, if you hide in there, you cannot be seen from outside. Basically, you would hear noise when the police made a raid, then you would immediately go into one of those caves to hide from them.”

My interviewees felt they lived the life of a criminal, having to escape and hide all the time. Yun-jeong continued describing her experience in China thus:

“I was afraid that I could be caught anytime. I felt hopeless as I had no idea for how long my life had to be that way. In China, I just kept running away and hiding somewhere to be safe. Going back to North Korea was not an option as I would be punished and treated as a traitor. I could not think of going to South Korea as a possible option at the time, so what I had was nothing but a prisoner’s life.”

Kyung-sin, a woman who also spent 8 years in a marriage with a Chinese man said:

“If you have to keep escaping and hiding, you feel like a criminal. Why would you hide or run away if you were not a criminal?”

As illustrated in the interviews, North Koreans in China live with the constant fear of repatriation due to their illegal status. As a result, they carefully choose work environments where they will not be exposed to the public eye as irregular migrants. For example, North Korean men would often work on farms remote from cities, while North Korean women would work as live-in-nannies, carers or domestic workers, so they could stay inside a house all the time, or choose to work in enclosed spaces such as car washes, restaurant kitchens or brothels where they only need to engage with a small number of people. Five of my thirty female interviewees had a job in the workplaces mentioned above instead of getting married to a Chinese groom. Yun, who worked at Karaoke in order to avoid police crackdowns, said:

“As I refused to marry a Chinese man, the broker arranged work at the restaurant for me. The customers of the restaurant would arrive in their cars and some of them were policemen. Whenever a police car came, I ran away to the mountain near the restaurant. Sometimes, I ended up running off several times a day and the manager got fed up with it, and finally fired me. I asked the broker for another job and this time it was work at a karaoke. We do not have karaokes in North Korea so I had no idea what the place was for and what I was supposed to do there. I soon found out that I was actually sold to an adult bar. I had no choice but to work there as I had nowhere else to go and nothing else to rely on.”

Chul-min, who was 17 years old when he arrived in China in 2012, had worked and hidden himself for two years in farms run by a couple who made a fake family registration for him in the form of adoption. He explained that:

“There was a field behind the house and I worked there all day long. You could not reach the field without going through the house so no one from outside would know that I was working there.”

Whilst such closed environments provide protection against the police and immigration authorities, they at the same time make North Koreans more vulnerable to being forced to work in poor working conditions and even labour exploitation, including an excessive workload or working hours.

Hwa-ran, who worked at a Chinese inn and talked about her tough working environment and overwork as follows:

“It was an inn so there were guests every day and night. I thought that there would be a lot of work. It was even worse than I imagined and when I actually began to work, I soon realised that I was expected to replace all the previous employees by myself and do all the housekeeping alone - from washing linen and cleaning the place to serving the guests. I did not get enough sleep and had to work constantly whenever I was awake. Especially in winter, when I had to hand wash the duvets in cold water, the skin on my hands would peel off like bark from an old dry tree.”

In addition, some interviewees experienced discrimination from Chinese workers. For example, Jinsuk, who worked in a fish factory with a few Chinese workers, recalled her experience of being given a lot more work than her Chinese colleagues because of her illegal status. She remembered:

“Whatever we did, Chinese and North Koreans were not on equal grounds. North Koreans had to work twice as much as Chinese, otherwise we would be penalised for underwork. If we did not achieve the tasks they had set us to do, [the employer] would report us to the police. I often became very angry about such unfair treatment, but could not complain as I knew that it was our illegal status above all that put us in that position. As a North Korean with illegal status, you just have to tolerate mistreatment.”

Other North Korean interviewees who had experienced wage and other forms of exploitation expressed the same view that, no matter what they suffered, they would not dare to challenge their mistreatment because of their illegal status. In the worst case scenario, their employers could always report them to the police as irregular migrants which would result in far worse trouble. Miseon who earlier told us about her fear of repatriation worked as a nanny in China and described her experience as follows:

“Despite repeated verbal pledges that they would pay me a salary, I did not get paid for the first three months. They probably knew that I had nowhere else to go and, as time went by, they even began to threaten to report me to the police.”

Hwa-ran, who worked at a Chinese inn also said:

“I didn’t even dare to ask ‘how come you do not pay me after all the work I have done?’ It was so unfair and unjust, but I could not complain about it or easily share my feelings with anyone else because of the risk of revealing of my identity. When I first worked at the inn, I worked twenty-four/seven and skin was coming off my hands because of that, but I still did not get any money. When I asked about my salary, the owner of the inn told me to work harder unless I wanted to be reported.”

Most of my interviewees who had work experience in China recall that they did not get paid properly. They add that, when they asked about their salary, the manager would give only a small amount of money on an irregular basis or refuse to pay by arguing that the food, maintenance and accommodation fee were their salaries. Some managers would even ask North Korean workers to pay them a ‘hiding fee’ out of their meager wages, or threaten to report them to the police. If North Koreans get a job in China, the employers can also be arrested or charged as they are assumed to have aided the illegal migrant in one way or

another. If caught, they normally end up having to pay a fine, and this is used as another excuse by employers for withholding wages. In the event case things go wrong, and they are fined, they will not experience a financial loss if they have not paid proper wages to the worker. Jeong-suk, who worked at a car wash, said:

“I worked at the car wash but the manager was getting away without paying me a penny for almost three months. It was the day before the supposedly third salary day and this time the manager said that the border security had come by to find me, and told me to run away. So I went and hid myself for the day. Next day, I went to see him to ask for my salary but he said that he had paid a fine to the police and there was no money left for me.”

Employers are criminalized and often fined for employing irregular migrant workers in other countries. However, in the case of North Korean workers in China matters are made worse by the fact that employers can also be rewarded for reporting North Korean migrants in China. This opens up another possibility for exploitation, since when an employer is on the verge of being caught for illegally employing North Korean migrants, or when the employee is no longer wanted and/or is demanding payment, the employer can simply pretend to have discovered the migrant and report her or him to the police, in which case they will be given a financial reward, typically of 3,000 - 5,000 Yuans (340 - 570 GBP) (Do et al., 2015). My North Korean interviewees testified that this contributed to the abuse they experienced in China. The fact that Chinese nationals receive a reward for reporting North Koreans even leads to North Koreans being mockingly described as ‘walking cashpoints’. According to my interviewees, there is a social atmosphere within the Korean-Chinese community and within the Chinese community near the border with North Korea that the North Koreans who cross the border are like slaves in the sense they can be mistreated and exploited without guilt.

Jeong-suk’s experience sheds a light on this. She returned to the car wash after a week and the manager finally reported her to the police for which he was rewarded. She was then repatriated to North Korea. She had to spend one year in a labour camp and following her release, she re-escaped from North Korea. She then returned to the same car wash again as she could not let go of her bitter memory of how the manager had treated her. She confronted him about the damage he had done to her but, with her limited Chinese language skills, when he proposed a job place for her to compensate what happened before, she ended up being deceived yet again by him and sold to work at a karaoke:

“He said he was sorry for not paying me but added it was not him who reported me to the police. He then suggested that he would find me work at a

restaurant as a gesture of apology. I do not know if I understood what he said correctly but, at least, I thought it was a restaurant. When I went to the given address though, it turned out to be an adult karaoke, so I called him begging him not to sell me to a karaoke bar. I cried saying, ‘It is okay not to pay me but please do not sell me to the karaoke’ but with my emotions aroused, I could not stop accusing him of selling me like a dog when he had no right to do so. I was deeply sad that things were happening because I was a North Korean. What made me feel despair was the fact that I could not make an official complaint about what was happening. As I think about it, even now it makes me cry and feel sad.”

Jeong-suk managed to escape from the karaoke through marriage, ironically with the aid of the broker who introduced her to the car wash in the first place. Hwa-ran, who worked at the inn, also talked about her bitter experience:

“I believe that the status and reputation of my country affected how I was treated in other countries. My country does not protect me overseas so I could not say ‘no’ to any unjust demands, to mistreatment or even to abuse. Even dogs bark in front of their house as they feel safe there. In China, however, North Korean women had to be quiet all the time. We even had to breathe quietly. How could I say a word out loud, I would be easily seen and caught by the police.”

So far, I have focused on the experiences of North Koreans in China with the constantly lingering fear of being caught and of forcible repatriation, with the insecurity of their life in general due to their illegal status, and with confrontations often breaching basic human rights. However, my interviewees nonetheless insist that it was their choice to endure such harsh conditions including labour and wage exploitation to avoid their Chinese employers reporting them to the police. They describe it as ‘a choice for the better’.

7.3.2 *Bad but better than in North Korea*

As one of my interviewees, Jeongyun, puts it, “It is sometimes better to be exploited than not, depending on where you are.” This is a story that many North Koreans tell when they reflect on their respective experience in North Korea and China. Many of my interviewees who made a statement of this kind added that even if you wanted to be exploited to gain something useful, such as money or rice, it would be impossible in North Korea. In China, on the other hand, though the working conditions are tough and challenging, they are at least

fed and, in some fortunate cases, get the opportunity to earn some money too. In general, my interviewees seemed to agree that a tough but not-starving life in China is preferable to the extreme hunger resulting from the dictatorial regime and its economic failure in North Korea. Su-yeon, who worked as a hostess at Karaoke, said:

“As of now, I can say I was subject to human rights violations and so on, but at the time, I did not know what it was. I only heard the terms ‘human rights’ and ‘exploitation’ for the first time when I came to South Korea. As I recall, I think I was even happy to be exploited back in China. To be honest, I did not mind or was even grateful in a way for the opportunity to be treated that way. I felt grateful even for a penny. Suppose that they reported me, I would be arrested and sent back to North Korea. Instead, they were giving me some money for my work. It was a very small amount, I know, but, in North Korea, no matter how hard you work, you earn nothing. I was honestly happy to work for 24 hours a day to earn that penny as, despite the payment being very small, I would not be able to survive without it.”

Sung-ran, who worked at a restaurant in China, said:

“I went to a Church and everyone was welcoming and treated me well as they knew that I was from North Korea. They first suggested marriage as a way of settlement but I did not feel that I was prepared to do that, so I instead replied that I was seeking a job. I added that I would not particularly want a salary as long as accommodation and meals were provided. There was a missionary whose cousin was running a big restaurant in the city. He made a phone call but it was not very successful as they thought that my Chinese was not good enough to work there. Then, the cousin’s grandmother still wanted to meet with me in the city centre to see if I would be capable of doing any work at the restaurant. My physique was not so bad and so I was accepted. After the meeting, which was a kind of job interview, the missionary left me at the restaurant and I began to work there. I mentioned that I would be okay just with accommodation and meals with no salaries. They took me to the kitchen to wash dishes first. I worked really hard there. I was only asked to wash dishes but I cleaned the floor as well. An hour or two were enough for me to do all the work that would have taken some other workers a few hours to do. After about three months, they helped me to make an ID card - it was a fake one but still useful in China - and also

gave me a small amount of salary. While I would have been happy to sleep in the restaurant, they let me sleep at the manager's house together with the other workers of the restaurant."

Other interviewees also stated that although they faced various rights violations in their work environments, it was nonetheless their choice to continue to work there. Kyung-soo, who worked on a computer assembly line in a Chinese factory for a year in 2011, puts it like this:

"I went to China to be fed more. I had to keep standing up and work for 16 hours per day to assemble computers. It was tough but I was by no means forced to do so. It was my choice to move to China in the first place and likewise it was my own decision to stay there. The decision was made every morning to stay there as the situation in China was better than that in North Korea."

Considering this active element of choice, it is difficult to view their labour in China as always 'forced labour' as defined by the ILO's 1930 Forced Labour Convention, namely, as 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily' (ILO, 1930). Certainly, when employers use the threat of reporting a worker to the authorities as a means of exacting labour, North Koreans would count as victims of 'forced labour' so defined. But when no such threat is made by the individual employer, and the worker simply accepts the appalling pay and conditions as a result of their more general fear of discovery, they would not automatically or necessarily qualify as 'forced labourers'. For some, this means that North Koreans in China are essentially in the same position as illegal migrant workers of other nationalities in other countries (Kim and Burt, 2015; Yoon and Lee, 2015). And yet, as discussed in the previous section, the risk of forcible repatriation and consequent harsh punishments back in North Korea render their choices even more choiceless.

The Chinese government does currently define them as illegal economic migrants and repatriates them back to their home country without protection or support of any sort, nor any consideration of the oppressive political situation in North Korea and the punishments that repatriated migrants will face.

7.4 *Conclusion*

In this chapter, my interview data show that North Koreans can and do actively choose to work even in extremely harsh and exploitative environments in Russia and China. These

data suggest that dominant discourse on labour trafficking, forced labour and modern slavery does not fully grasp the complexity of the realities North Koreans face.

Governmental publications, in particular the international framework of the US TIP reports, emphasize ‘coercion’ and ‘slave-like conditions’ while media and international NGOs have also largely framed the North Korean workers in Russia as slave-labourers and discussed the human rights issues associated with North Korean overseas workers from that angle. This encourages policy solutions that would not necessarily be welcomed by the individuals affected. For example, as a means to terminate forced labour, Amnesty International (2018) has argued that the countries that receive North Korean workers, such as Russia, Kuwait, Poland, Qatar and Sri Lanka, should simply stop issuing new working visa or extending current visas. The international community put the Russian government under such intense pressure in this regard that Russia has decided to return all of its 50,000 North Korean workers to North Korea by 2019 (CNN, 2018), and similar processes of returning North Korean workers are expected to take place in countries like Cairo and Malaysia. The North Korean government has also agreed to this for various reasons - notably to improve its international standing so as to be able to receive economic benefits from other countries, especially the United States and to avoid international criticism, both of which will help to sustain the current regime. In other words, human rights advocacy that frames North Koreans’ overseas work as ‘forced labour’ and ‘modern slavery’ has ended up by simultaneously taking opportunities to work abroad away from North Koreans like my interviewees quoted above, and, potentially, shoring up the regime that oppresses them to the point that even appalling work abroad is chosen in preference to remaining at home.

There are also NGOs (Human Right Watch, 2018) that frame North Korean workers as migrant workers. This alternative perspective acknowledges that living standards and working conditions in receiving countries such as Russia and Malaysia do not meet those established by the International labour Organization (ILO), but argues that, as member states of the ILO, if these countries were to abide by the provisions set out in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work announced in June 1998, the exploitative labour and human rights abusive environments currently endured by North Korean workers would be improved and rectified. In contrast to the dominant discourse that has focused mainly on coercion and consequently defined North Korean workers as slaves, thereby ultimately helping only to push them out of Russia, these NGOs seek to improve the work environment by securing basic labour rights for North Koreans. This approach seemingly respects the voluntary decisions made by North Korean overseas workers.

However, the latter framework also brings its own problems. As Crosby (2006) notes, voluntary migrants are subdivided into ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ migrants, with only the former entitled to claim rights and protection in the receiving country. The latter are categorised as criminals to be deported. Unfortunately, many North Koreans fall into the latter category - those who flee from their designated labour site in Russia as well as virtually all North Koreans working in China. Unless opportunities for legal overseas working are massively extended such that all North Koreans, men, women and children, who wish to work abroad could have the opportunity to do so, large numbers of North Koreans will continue to make the unauthorized crossing into China and to seek employment there. There is no realistic chance that legal routes to work abroad will be increased in this way, and though the Human Right Watch approach is a welcome alternative for the few who are able to participate in official overseas workers schemes, it is not a solution for the many North Koreans who currently live and work illegally abroad.

My interview data show that the reality of North Koreans’ experience does not fit into the supposedly mutually exclusive categories of forced-slavery and voluntary/economic-migration as it includes co-existing elements of both. To focus on the former is dangerous in that it can lead to barring movement to Russia that is actively desired whereas fixating on the latter is equally dangerous since it can justify the forcible repatriation of North Koreans by the Chinese authorities as illegal (economic) migrants.

The assumed clear division between forced and voluntary migration, which is increasingly criticized by migration scholars (Betts and Kaytaz, 2009; Bakewell, 2010), is very obviously a fictitious dichotomy in the case of North Koreans in Russia and China. The data presented in this chapter also draw attention to a wider problem with how the relationship between structure and agency is conceived in dominant discourse on human rights and mobility. Structural factors, whether in the form of the highly oppressive political regime under which North Koreans live, or the material deprivation it leads to for individual North Koreans, or in the form of the immigration regime operated by the Chinese government, are overlooked in talk of trafficking and forced labour. For a situation to be deemed to be labour trafficking or forced labour an agent is required, a wicked trafficker or employer, who compels a non-agential victim to do his or her bidding. The trafficking/smuggling, forced/voluntary, freedom/slavery binaries that underpin dominant discourse on rights and mobility all “reflect a preoccupation with the form of compulsion produced by the exercise of direct, personalistic power, and so a very narrow and distinct understanding of ‘force’”, as Julia O’Connell Davidson (2015:76) puts it. She also mentions that “it is an understanding of ‘force’ that

misses the way that social and political structures can ‘force fates on people while appearing to leave their fates up to them’”, quoting Reiman (1987:23, cited at *ibid*:76). The model of agency that informs the dominant discourse on rights and mobility is equally thin. For though the choice of fates forced on my interviewees by the structures within which they live were unenviable to the extreme, they did actively choose between them. This does not make those choices “voluntary”, and it does not mean that my interviewees were “free”, but it does mean that unless international policy makers and human rights NGOs address and transform the structures that leave North Koreans with such bleak choices, they will continue to face the forms of abuse and labour exploitation described in this chapter.

8. BOUNDARY TROUBLES

8.1 Introduction

As the conclusion to the previous chapter noted, the conceptual binaries that have typically informed policy as well as popular understandings of human mobility cannot adequately accommodate the experience of the North Koreans I interviewed in South Korea. Rather than falling clearly into one of two opposing categories, either forced or voluntary, their experience of moving across borders and living and working in China or Russia incorporated elements of both choice and coercion, volition and force, and the boundaries between the two are not easily drawn or fixed. As was seen in Chapter 5, for example, a marriage that might be classified as ‘forced’ at the moment it was initiated could, over time, become a relationship that the wife actively chose to continue by arranging for the husband to move with her to South Korea. By the same token, a marriage of convenience actively chosen by a North Korean woman could, over time, lead to extreme and severe unfreedom.

This chapter develops the theme of boundary troubles through a focus on my interviewees’ experience of moving to, and living in, South Korea. It aims to show that the ambiguities of ‘freedom’ and its complex relation to both structure and agency, so also the conceptual boundary troubles associated with different forms of movement, do not end when North Koreans travel to South Korea. The chapter looks first at the narratives of those North Korean escapees who moved directly and quickly from China to South Korea and shows how their experience blurs the conventional distinctions between trafficking/smuggling and coercion/volition that are assumed in dominant discourse. The second section shifts to consider the ambiguous status of North Koreans living in South Korea in terms of their self-perception as migrants, foreigners and unequal to ordinary South Korean citizens despite the fact that they formally hold legal citizenship. Finally, the chapter explores the lives of my North Korean interviewees in South Korea, and the fact that being in South Korea is not not necessarily experienced as a form of liberation, something that again troubles the slavery/freedom binary assumed in much of the academic and policy literature.

Another type of binary appears when discussing slavery and freedom in the experiences

of North Korean escapees. Their journey from North Korea to South Korea is described in dominant discourse as ‘pursuit of liberty from slave-state’ and often portrayed as ‘Modern-day Underground Railroad’ which reference the Underground Railroad by means of which slaves in the Southern states of America escaped to Canada in the 19th century (Liberty in North Korea, 2013; Blight, 2009). When elaborating on their journey, an image of ‘escaped slaves’ is imposed in analogy to African American slave escapees such as Frederick Douglass. An extract from Kirkpatrick shows a typical example: “In the spring of 1857, the antislavery Vigilance Committee of Philadelphia copied into its confidential Underground Railroad Record an excerpt from a letter it had received from Abram Harris, a former slave who had escaped from his master in Charles County, Maryland. Now, fast-forward 150 years and consider the story of a young woman who escaped from the slave-state of North Korea. ‘Hannah’ is a modern-day Abram Harris. She rode the new underground railroad across China to temporary refuge in Southeast Asia and eventually to a permanent home in the United States” (Kirkpatrick, 2014:1-2). In particular, abolitionists pronounce that North Korean escapees have found liberty in liberal democratic society and encourage more North Koreans to escape from the oppressive slave-state. The liberty here is defined/understood as the opposition to slavery and the focus is often on the contrast between the two which raises an issue: Have North Koreans truly found liberty in South Korea? This chapter discusses ‘liberty’ experienced by North Korean escapees and thus questions the meaning and scope of it in dominant narratives.

8.2 *Neither forced/trafficked nor voluntary/smuggled*

Up until 2017, the total number of North Korean escapees in South Korea is approximately 31,000 (SKMU, 2017) and the inflow per annum has increased ever since the late 1990s when North Korea went through the extreme famine, also known as the Arduous March/The March of Suffering. Most North Koreans who come to South Korea first cross the border irregularly to China through smuggling and brokerage networks and then move to South Korea via a third country, such as Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia or Thailand. This type of movement to South Korea has been described in previous chapters. However, a small portion of escapees, about 3-5% according to Unification of South Korea (2017) statistics, travel to South Korea directly from China by ship or aeroplane with a fake passport and without going through a third country. Some of my interviewees fall into this category, and their experience is considered in this section.

For North Koreans wishing to escape to the South, crossing the border between the

two Koreas would be the fastest way to reach Seoul. However, the border area has been designated as the demilitarized zone since the ceasefire of the Korean war in 1953, and is subject to very strict control and surveillance with extremely limited movement allowed by both governments. The next fastest route to Seoul is thus to go through China. Once North Koreans cross the border into China - mostly with the help of smugglers, some manage to get to South Korea quickly with fake passports that serve to disguise them as Korean-Chinese or even South Korean. If no significant obstacles are encountered, it takes only around three to seven days to move from North to Seoul Korea via China in this way. This journey is commonly called Jik-haeng (journey to Seoul) by North Koreans. Jik-haeng in Korean usually refers to transportation undertaken by train, bus, or aeroplanes, in particular to direct routes with no intermediate stops. In the context of North Korean movement to South Korea, Jik-haeng refers to cases in which people travel directly to South Korea from China without going through a third country in South-east Asia, or via Mongolia. From now on, I will interchangeably use Jik-haeng and its English translation, 'the direct line' or 'the direct train'.

Jik-haeng is arguably the most favoured route to South Korea as it is physically less demanding, relatively fast and fairly safe. It is widely believed, however, that relatively few North Koreans manage to catch the direct line, even though many of them seek it. There is no official data available for the exact number of North Koreans who took Jik-haeng, however, due to escapees' reluctance to reveal the details of their journey. My own interview data show that such escapees fear that if they described in detail how they found and took the direct line, the route would become widely known and consequently more North Koreans wishing to move to South Korea would follow it. Then, information about the brokers or smugglers who organise the direct line would become easily available, putting them in danger of arrest by the Chinese or North Korean authorities. If the line were closed, escapees would no longer be able to bring their families, relatives or friends to join them through Jik-haeng. It is worth mentioning that, although they want to keep the direct line under cover and reusable, the direct line has already been exposed to the public eye through other North Koreans' testimonies in the international media (see, for example, International Crisis Group, 2006).

As noted above, it has been estimated by some NGOs that up to 5% of the total number of North Korean escapees came to South Korea through the direct line. The figure is almost certainly capped by the fact that it is a very high cost option, and even North Koreans with sufficient funds will likely have limited access to the necessary smuggling networks. Few North Koreans are acquainted with the operations of Jik-haeng and it is hard to gain

concrete information and/or reliable contacts for smuggling networks, since the need to evade the severe surveillance of the authorities in both North Korea and China means that smugglers need to work in great secrecy. Moreover, it is difficult for North Koreans to contact smuggling networks or brokers by themselves as there are no well-organised refugee hubs in China. One thus needs to know someone reliable, like a family member or relative, who has access to smugglers or brokers. Furthermore, even amongst smugglers and brokers, few are capable of arranging the direct line. All this means that in general, it is very hard for North Koreans to take Jik-haeng. Those who do often rely on help from NGOs and missionary groups but the high costs are prohibitively high for most North Koreans.

One of the requirements to travel by Jik-haeng is to have illegal documents including false passports. This makes travel safe and fast, but at the same time costly. The ministry of South Korea issued electronic passports from 2008, and this led to a significant rise in the price of fake passports. Where a false passport cost around 3-4000 pounds in the early 2000s, it sharply increased to 7-8000 pounds over the next ten years (International Crisis Group, 2006; Williamson, 2011). As it is nearly impossible for North Koreans to save that amount of money considering their poor living and working conditions both in North Korea and China, only a small number of North Korea's privileged elite, and North Koreans who have family members already living in South Korea can afford this route. In particular, Jik-haeng is normally chosen and supported by some family members in South Korea for the elderly and very young people, because overland smuggling routes transiting South-east Asian countries would be too physically and mentally challenging for them to survive (UNODC, 2015). This was also the case in my own research. Amongst my forty-five interviewees, the four who took the direct line were elderly North Koreans. Besides, a two-year-old toddler whose mother was one of the interviewees was taken to the direct line by an NGO activist essentially working as a broker.

An unexpected and important finding from my interviews with those who took the direct line is that they were often unwillingly or involuntarily smuggled into China, then finally to South Korea, either not having been fully informed about the journey they were to undertake, or having been moved by means of some element of deception and/or coercion. Again, their experience does not fit with the binary conceptualization of movement either forced or voluntary, either trafficking or smuggling - that commonly informs the migration literature and international migration laws. Moreover, it is important to note that the literature on migration and North Koreans' mobility has rarely considered the movement of old people and very young children.

Among my interviewees, those who took the direct line were aged between 65 and 85 years old. Their children, mostly aged between 30 and 50, had already settled down in South Korea for some time, and saved the money to pay their parents' travel expenses over a period of time there. It appeared from the narratives of the elderly that they did not actually want to leave North Korea in the first place but were deceived by smugglers hired by their children in South Korea as follows. The North Korean smuggler(s), employed by their children, would visit their homes in North Korea and propose to take elderly people to the border to meet with their children, typically saying 'Your daughter or son has been waiting for you at the border and they sent me here to fetch you.' When they arrived at the border area, still on the North Korean side, the smuggler(s) would make a phone call to their (adult) children, and give the phone to the elderly parent to speak to the (adult) child. The child would then say that they could not cross the border to go back to North Korea in order to meet the parent because of the very strict border patrols, so they had to stay on the Chinese side. They would add that they had brought a certain amount of money from South Korea to give to the parent(s) if they would only cross to China to meet them. Some of my elderly North Korean interviewees then crossed the border into China with the help of smugglers in order to see their children and receive the money.

In other cases, they only realised that they were being taken to China when they were already there. An old interviewee, Ging-ba, recalled:

"I spoke to my son on the smuggler's mobile phone and I realised that I was in China. I must have been on the Chinese side for a few hours. The smuggler only said to me 'We need to go over there and then cross the river to meet with your son.' I clearly remember his words. He said the river, but never mentioned the border. He did not even tell me that we were going to China. There was no way for me to figure out that I was in China unless told otherwise as I had never been to the borderland nor China. From then on, I had no choice but just to follow the smuggler's directions to meet with my son."

Once arrived in China with the smugglers, the elderly would have a conversation with their children again on a mobile phone who would now tell the truth that they were in fact in South Korea and wanted them to come over. The smugglers would transfer the elderly to intermediate guides in safe-shelters located in one of the large cities in China who play an important role in making their journey safe by preparing fake passports and providing guidance in China. As soon as the illegal documents were prepared, they went to South Korea by ship or plane.

Such migration processes through Jik-haeng are remembered and described as involuntary movement by my interviewees. They claimed that they had no other option but to go to South Korea as they could not return to North Korea. Once they had crossed the border illegally, no matter how, they would be subject to imprisonment and severe punishment in labour camps. If they returned to North Korea. Remaining in China was equally impossible, as they would live with the same constant fear of being caught and repatriated that those who crossed the border voluntarily experienced, and that has been described in previous chapters. Some of them added that a lack of geographic knowledge of China also prevented them considering going back home. Nevertheless, they were still reluctant to move to South Korea, which they regarded as the deepest betrayal of their country. South Korea is considered to be an enemy of North Korea, and moving South was totally against their sense of patriotic duty and loyalty to their country. Chul-jim said:

“I tried to go back to North Korea because I did not want to be a traitor. I thought smuggling myself back home in secret was the best option. But I had to idea as to where I was and where to go from there, or how to return home.”

He attempted to return to North Korea after three days in China. Within few hours though, due to the lack of Chinese language skills and geographic awareness, he was caught by his smuggler and taken back to the shelter. Similarly, other interviewees tried to get back to North Korea but were stopped by their smugglers. In some cases, the smugglers would not even allow them to go out, while some interviewees chose not to leave their accommodation because of the possibility of being caught by the Chinese authorities. With no other option available to them, they said that they ultimately took Jik-haeng to Seoul. They stressed that they had not consented to move, and the journey was a result of deception by their children and smugglers. In the words of Young-hee said:

“I had only bad options at the time, either being a stuffed betrayer in South Korea, or a loyal prisoner in North Korea, or an illegal homeless person in China. I chose the third worst among them to survive.”

While the movement of the elderly North Korean interviewees can be described as involuntary in the sense it took place only as a consequence of the deception and confinement, young children who move via the direct line are essentially ‘kidnapped’, according to the interview data. Some of the mothers among my interviewees left their children behind in North Korea. When they settled in South Korea, they sent smugglers or NGO activists from South Korea to China to North Korea in order to bring their children to South Korea. At the time of

their own escape, most of their children were too young to make a journey with their mother. The word 'kidnapping' is used by the mothers as they did not have or could not obtain the consent of the father of their children to bring them to South Korea. One of them, Kyung-soon, explained:

"I had to kidnap my two-year-old son as there was no other way to save him. After arriving in South Korea, I called my Chinese husband many times to make sure that my son was ok. But he would not tell me about him. What was worse, he blackmailed me that if I did not send money to him, he would not feed my son at all. So I sent money to him for a while but still he said no words about my son. I became really fed up with it and worried about my son. Yet I could not go to China by myself as I was still so afraid. If I met my husband or anyone in his family, I would be beaten and imprisoned by him or them. This was exactly the way that I was treated when I did anything that they did not like. So, I asked one of the NGO activists, who helped North Koreans move out of China, to bring my son to South Korea."

The NGO activist, Eun-kyung, went to China and brought her son by hiring a smuggler who could prepare fake documents. According to my interview with the activist concerned, he had some experiences on 'kidnapping' which he understood as 'saving' or 'rescuing':

"I am proud of myself that I saved her son. I did my job, which is to rescue North Koreans in China. When she says 'I kidnapped my son', you might take it in a negative way, but kidnapping was the only way to rescue him who had been abused by his father. It is a 'good kidnapping' compared to the bad ones which really are a crime."

As with the elderly, young children (whether of a North Korean mother and Chinese father, or of a North Korean couple) board the direct line involuntarily in the sense that their movement from China or North Korea to South Korea is not their own choice. How should such movement be interpreted? It is interesting to consider how legal definitions of migration and smuggling might apply to North Koreans and their journey through Jik-haeng, especially for the elderly and very young people.

The Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, defines the act of smuggling and smuggled migrants in Article 3 (UN, 2000b):

The procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other

material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.

According to this definition, with its focus on the illegal entry of a person, the elderly North Koreans and young children should be classified as ‘smuggled migrants’ since they illegally moved to South Korea with fake passports and documents. However, Article 3 also mentions examples where migrants enter receiving countries illegally through deception or corruption that is related to trafficking. This too could apply, at least partly, to the course of the elderly North Koreans and young children described above. According to the UN protocol, trafficking is defined as (UN, 2000a):

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

From this protocol, the three features are crucial in defining ‘trafficking: 1) a list of acts (the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons); 2) a list of means (the threat, use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception and so on); 3) and the motive (for the purpose of exploitation). As applied to the case of elderly North Koreans’ direct - Jik-haeng - movement to South Korea, deception and coercion could be relevant. When crossing the border, the smugglers did not inform them of the destination and only revealed where they were afterwards. They were deceived to move to China and it was too late to return to North Korea. They were afraid of the severe punishments awaiting illegal border-crossers and, as a result, they could no longer stay in China under the threat of forcible repatriation if caught, and had no choice but to agree to go to South Korea. For their journey from North Korea to China, there was an element of deception which could make it trafficking. For their journey from China to South Korea, on the other hand, although it was not entirely an active decision, it was still their choice for survival to an extent and hence could be seen as ‘voluntary’. In other words, depending on the place of departure and destination, their movement could be classified differently. This highlights the fact that although deception, coercion and lack of volition are taken to be clear boundaries or markers of the line between trafficking and smuggling, the degree of deception, coercion and lack of volition can vary, and the formal definitions provided in the Protocols do not make it possible to differentiate with certainty between processes described as ‘trafficking’ and those described as ‘smuggling’.

Moreover, my elderly interviewees did not themselves enter into any contract with the smuggler, but were moved by means of deception and force and in this respect, they look like ‘victims of trafficking’. Yet they were not moved in this way for purposes of what would conventionally be understood as ‘exploitation’, and in that respect look like ‘smuggled persons’. The UN Trafficking Protocol states that in the case of children under the age of 18, the means used to transport (the threat, use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception and so on) are irrelevant, since children are assumed to be incapable of consent. Where young children between a North Korean mother and a Chinese father are brought by the mother from China to South Korea, the purpose of exploitation also appears irrelevant, and the movement could be described as smuggling, not trafficking. Yet from the perspective of the Chinese father who does not consent to the movement, the child’s movement may appear as trafficking. According to the legal definitions, trafficking is said to be forced while smuggling is voluntary. However, while an artificial separation and distinction between the two is seen as necessary from a legal perspective, as can be seen in the cases described in this section, the relationship between forced and voluntary elements of movement is complicated and often entangled. The boundary between smuggling and trafficking, and between voluntary and forced migration, may exist for legal and policy purposes, but does not map onto the realities of North Koreans’ migratory experience. In the following section, I consider a different kind of boundary trouble.

8.3 *Citizen and non-Citizen or failed citizen*

For the last twenty years or so, the settlement and adaptation of the North Korean escapees in South Korea has been one of the most actively debated and researched topics in the South Korean policy sector as well as amongst scholars (Do et al., 2017). Due to the extraordinary situation of the country divided upon armistice in 1953 and since both governments claim to be the legitimate office for the whole country, North Koreans are granted legal citizenship in South Korea unless suspicious of being or related to spies/agents. When North Korean escapees arrive in South Korea, they are therefore investigated by the National Intelligence Service (NIS) and the National Police Agency (NPA) to ensure that they are not spies. When verified, they are sent to the Settlement Support Center for North Korean Refugees (in Korean: 북한이탈주민정착지원사무소 Bughan Ital Jumin Jeongchagjiwon Samuso) for re-education. The curriculum covers South Korean history, geography, sociology, politics and cultures, as well as everyday life skills such as the use of computer, internet and smartphones. Vocational education, and housing, driving and banking resources are also included. They

are then provided with opportunities to be acquainted with various facilities in South Korea such as councils, public libraries and shopping malls with a personal tutor (Demick, 2010; Do et al., 2015). One of my interviewees, Hee-cheol, said:

“I was first delighted to come to South Korea but my happiness lasted only for about one year. During this period, Although I was interrogated by NIS (National Information Service) for the first month, stayed at Hanawon for another 3-4 months and then lived with only basic support for North Koreans for the next 6 months, it was not too bad. For the next 6 months, I lived on the basic living security given to North Koreans. After the settlement period of one year passed, I had to live on my own and get a job but my experience only taught me that I was not the same Korean as other South Koreans.”

After the re-education programme, North Korean escapees would be provided with a council house or receive government subsidy to rent a house. For the first six months of their settlement, they receive settlement fund (of about 5,000 GBP) and maintenance fund (of about 300 GBP per month). In addition, several different support schemes for education, vocation and housing are available through their settlement. Since 2015, they have been granted a total of between 14,000 and 40,000 GBP for resettlement over a course of three years and the payments are made either monthly or annually (SKMU, 2017).

The overall narrative of the North Korean refugees in South Korea, which will be discussed below, is characterized by comparisons between his/her life in South Korea to that in North Korea and China. When asked how their life had been after coming to South Korea, most of my interviewees gave a short answer: “All is well.” This ‘wellness’ in their somewhat brief response were elaborated in two different ways when I questioned them further. The first emphasises the ‘better living conditions’ in the South than in North Korea and China, and the second dwells on the ‘free and happy life’ as a result of their legal status in South Korea. In both cases, most interviewees agreed that their life in South Korea was better overall.

Having experienced the vulnerability due to illegal status in China, the citizenship granted to them in South Korea meant freedom to most of my interviewees. The first reaction from the majority of the interviewees when asked about the good aspects of life in South Korea would concern their citizenship in a way or another, e.g. “The best thing about life in South Korea? You do not have to run away anymore and no one follows and/or tries to catch you.” The transition from irregular migrants to legal citizens was often one of the main aims of their migration to South Korea and Jeongyun, commented on the issue as follows:

“On the day I received the resident certificate, I cried a lot. I finally became a Korean citizen. I could not believe it and it took a while to sink in my mind. I love South Korea. I am so grateful that no one is trying to catch me here.”

Miseon who realised and was saddened by the fact that her illegal status would be passed onto her child in China, was delighted to have her name registered as a citizen:

“It is the happiest thing in South Korea that no one is trying to catch me anymore. You need a legal name no matter where you are. Without it, even if you die, you are not officially recognised as a dead person. I was heartbroken to learn that my child could not be registered in China because of my illegal status. I knew by experience what a life bearing illegal status was like and it was so sad that my child would have the same fate in China.”

North Korean escapees are very satisfied with obtaining legal citizenship in South Korea, and this is perhaps why much in South Korean scholarship and literature focuses only on the formal acquisition of citizenship rights (Kim J, 2010; Lee, 2006; Wolman, 2013). North Koreans’ arrival in South Korea is portrayed as the happy ending to their journey of suffering. Dominant popular and political discourse in South Korea also assumes that, upon receiving citizenship, North Koreans can live in South Korea on an equal footing with South Koreans. In this discourse, ‘migrant’ and ‘citizen’ are imagined in binary opposition. Yet my research suggests that once again, the boundary between the two categories is not so clear cut for North Korean escapees. Their lives in South Korea are still to a large extent that of foreigners.

One can examine the extent to which North Koreans enjoy their citizenship in South Korea according to T. H. Marshall’s classic definition of citizenship. He defines citizenship as ‘a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed’ (Marshall, 1964:84). Although ‘full members’ have equal status, rights and duties in his definition, paradoxically not everyone who possesses citizenship status is equal to everyone else (O’Connor, 1993:503) and the concept of ‘equal rights’ expounded in his argument is problematic. In particular, his classic definition of citizenship has been criticized for not conceptualising the rights of secondary citizens by overlooking gender and race hierarchies (Fraser and Gordon, 1992). In the case of North Korean refugees in South Korea, my interviewees also feel that they are not equal to South Koreans despite having the same status and rights. This is partly due to the fact that there is an atmosphere of social, political, and cultural prejudice against people from the North, which is often regarded as inferior to the South especially in its

economic and political aspects. The discrepancy between the two countries' economic development has been constantly widening over the past 40 years, and the Stalinist dictatorship of North Korea is also widely considered as an outdated system, as well as objectionable for other reasons. The depreciation and devaluation of North Koreans in South Korea has been documented in both qualitative and quantitative research. In addition, the experiences of my interviewees provide supporting examples which indicate that the good features of living in South Korea - i.e. citizenship - come with social hurdles such as discrimination.

Since the Korean Civil War (1950-1953), the South Korean government and media have continually condemned the North Korean regime and institutionalised hostility against North Korea, which was depicted as the country's main enemy until 2000. Through school education and military service, the propaganda that 'North Korea is a Communist country and the Communist Party is to be destroyed' has been spread throughout the South Korean population, and the so-called 'red complex' was created under governmental directions and still exists among South Korean people in political, social and cultural terms.

In particular, South Korean people over the age of sixty, i.e. those who experienced the war themselves, share an anger and distaste for North Korea as, for them, North Koreans are no more than traitors who attacked the other half of the nation and no more than criminals who killed their families. Anxiety combined with the red complex seems to have boosted the internalization of propaganda about the North Korean regime, and with this the idea that North Korean people are also inferior, with far less economic power and a lower level of education than South Koreans. The literature of South Korean scholars on the topic reflects this general atmosphere.

My interviewees also experienced hostility, distaste and social/cultural discrimination during their settlement period in South Korea. The intonation in the Korean language can be a signal of where one comes from, and North Korean intonation is distinct from any South Korean dialects. As their background is easily revealed, it affects their potential job markets as well as daily life. My North Korean interviewees state that the jobs available to them are mostly blue collar rather than white, although they try to be involved with emotional or service labour such as teaching in public schools, nursing, sales or telemarketing. Sung-ran attended a job interview for a salesperson position in a department store:

"I spoke only few words but the interviewer recognised my intonation and asked if I came from the North so I said yes. From that moment, I felt that I was somehow looked down on and treated unfairly. He then said in a sharp voice that no one would want to buy products from North Korean escapees so I had better

look for a different job.”

After a few attempts without a success, she ended up in a cosmetic factory where verbal engagement is not needed for the job. Besides intonations, the prevailing prejudice towards North Koreans in the society also contributes to discrimination in job markets. For example, Hee-cheol who graduated from a prestigious university in North Korea and is a well-trained Korean-medicine doctor was accepted by a Korean-medicine hospital in South Korea but the employment soon ended. He described his experience as follows:

“Patients liked my treatments and they gave feedback that I was a good doctor. I had quite a lot of experience in treating patients from North Korea, which is why the senior managing doctor of the hospital decided to employ me in the first place. It was the other doctors though who protested against my working in the hospital. They insisted that I was not good enough without any evidence and simply because I came from North Korea. The senior managing doctor tried to persuade them for a long while to accept me but, at some point, it occurred to me that I was being too much of a burden to him so I decided to quit.”

Hee-cheol currently runs his own Korean-medicine hospital in cooperation with other North Korean escapees who have backgrounds in medicine. Such discrimination sometimes takes the form of a glass ceiling/wall. The timeline of some interviewees’ narratives start with a good memory of South Korean people especially in the initial stages of settlement, but they report soon finding invisible barriers as they tried to further integrate into South Korean society. Cheol-jin who is a university student, said:

“In the first term at university, when people in the class who were accustomed to the university found out that I came from North Korea, they showed a great interest and often provided me help to get used to university life and life in South Korea in general. They taught me how to apply for a course online, took me to the restaurants so that I could mingle with them. I was happy as people were kind to me.”

He added that as the course at the university progressed he found he always remained a person to whom South Korean students were willing to provide help, but never came to be seen as a genuine friend or colleague. He recalled feeling that there was a glass wall between him and other students:

“It is a kind of feeling that I could not exactly prove with any evidence. People were kind to me when I asked about anything or tried to engage with them in official school activities. They were even willing to help me when asked or needed. Still, I often felt that there was an invisible wall between us. It was felt more strongly when I tried to go inside their social circle. It looked as if they had their own world and I was an outsider. I guess it is similar to what disabled people might feel, that people are kind and provide help to them but becoming friends is a different matter. It felt just like that.”

Some North Korean escapees do regard interest in or kindness to them as a type of sympathy, but others perceive it as discrimination. Jung-su said:

“I do not normally tell people that I am from North Korea. When they find out where I come from, they show me sympathy and try to be kind to me. It may sound odd but it annoys me. Yes, I do come from North Korea but I am now living in South Korea, and I am not pitiful anymore. They still come with some food saying ‘North Koreans would not be able to afford it so I brought it, and you can have it’. They even ask if there are TVs in North Korea which I find so disrespectful. So when I am asked where I come from, I just say that I come from Kangwon province.”

Kangwon province exists both South and North Korea - it is similar to the situation of Berlin during the cold war era in that it is geographically a single province, but when the country was divided into two in 1953, the province was also divided into two regions - North Kangwon and South Kangwon belonging to North and South Korea respectively. Whether it is experienced as contempt or sympathy, what North Korean escapees sense is the prejudiced view prevalent in the society towards them - often perceived as socio-cultural discrimination - and this explains why many North Koreans would prefer not to reveal their North Korean identity in daily life.

North Koreans’ experience of socio-cultural discrimination and racism means that their lives in South Korea do not fully meet the three criteria of Marshall’s definition of citizenship - civil, political, and social rights. In the post-Marshall era, citizenship refers to a set of rights as well as status and identity (Joppke, 2007). Although North Korean escapees attain legal rights and status in South Korea, identity is also needed in order to fully exercise their citizenship. It is also argued that identity is not just given but formed by social processes over years through practices in daily life. In other words, a migrant is not a citizen but becomes

one by acquiring the social identity within a given community through time (Abrams, 2009). They become members of a community in the destination countries by identifying themselves as non-immigrant nationals based on integration into the society building some sense of belongings or completing duties as a member of the country, such as paying tax.

However, the empirical findings from North Koreans' experiences do not conform to this model. Even with the elapse of considerable time in South Korea, my interviewees still do not consider themselves equal to ordinary South Koreans due to the invisible socio-cultural walls encountered in their daily lives. Nor do they consider themselves as ordinary North Koreans either, since they think that by crossing the border, they betrayed their country and can never go back. No matter how long they live in South Korea, they are not fully integrated into the society, nor does their birth country provide a national identity either. The sentiments of Hwasun were shared by many other interviewees:

“When asked whether I come from North Korea, I do not say yes as I do not wish to trigger their prejudice. Then, they ask if I come from China and I either say nothing or just say no - I prefer to say no than to disguise myself as a Korean-Chinese. Still, I am neither North Korean, nor Chinese, nor Korean-Chinese, nor South Korean. I am just a vagabond.”

This implies that North Korean escapees do not have a firm identity or sense of belonging. Their narratives overall have the following common features depending on the duration of stay in South Korea. Those who have lived in South Korea for less than three years tend to be satisfied with their improved economic circumstances. The lower their socio-economic class was in North Korea, the bigger the contrast with their living standards in South Korea, and so the greater the level of their satisfaction. Another source of comfort is the comparison with North Koreans in China who have yet to come to South Korea, and who are still subject to the fear of repatriation from which the escapees in South Korea are free. On the other hand, those who have lived in South Korea for more than three years no longer seem to find happiness of this kind, but rather feel unhappy as they start to compare themselves to ordinary South Koreans, and to be increasingly conscious of the widespread socio-cultural segregation and the stigma that attaches to them as North Koreans. These negative reflections and distress often affect their adaptation to South Korean society in the long term.

Most current research on ‘North Koreans living in South Korea’ assumes a dichotomous relation between citizen and migrant. On the one hand, many researchers focus on legal citizenship, claiming North Koreans to be equal to South Koreans since their rights are equally protected by laws. Another group of researchers, however, depict North Koreans in

South Korea as migrants due to the socio-cultural discrimination they experience, and call for improvements to the general atmosphere towards North Korean escapees as well as related socio-cultural policies. Yet my interviewees who are North Koreans living in South Korea with citizenship do not regard themselves as either citizen or migrant, more as unsettled citizens or migrants with citizenship. Aspects of being a citizen and being a migrant coexist in their life and even some experiences are of neither, but rather of foreigners.

For North Koreans, formal citizenship does not necessarily mean ‘full citizenship’ with a sense of belonging, indeed, they often experience their status as unequal to South Korean nationals in many circumstances, despite the fact that there is no distinction as far as legal status is concerned. As Bridget Anderson (Anderson and Hughes, 2015:46) puts it, “citizenship does not guarantee inclusion. While formal membership is critical, modern states portray themselves not as arbitrary collections of people hung together by a common legal status but as communities of value, comprised of people who share common ideals and (exemplary) patterns of behaviour expressed through ethnicity, religion, culture or language.” In Anderson’s terms, North Koreans have not been integrated to ‘the communities of value’ as the border is racialized against their faith, culture and language. On the other hand, would belonging to ‘the community of value’ be sufficient to be a full member of the society? The answer is not obvious. The concept of ‘full citizenship’ is constructed and thus unattainable as Cohen (2014:12) puts it, “In the final analysis, citizenship does not make a citizenry equal. In fact, it appears to institutionalize both difference and inequalities, albeit in sometimes unexpected ways.” Citizenship is only one of many dimensions to their lives and classification/identification from this perspective does not overcome the fact of their being migrants. In fact, there are attempts to understand their life not as citizens but rather as migrants, which leads to further oppositional couplings between the two. As Anderson (ibid) observes, the citizen/migrant binary is questionable as it puts the subjects into a dominant liberal thought dichotomy. North Korean escapees’ experiences in South Korea have complexity that is not fully explained in citizen-or-migrant dichotomous approaches. The limitation of such approaches is revisited in the next section on slavery/freedom.

8.4 *Slavery/freedom binary - Neither free nor unfree*

As noted in Chapters 4 to 6, dominant NGO discourse often describes North Koreans as slaves, and their movement to South Korea is imagined as a quest for freedom. This section considers what ‘freedom’ means to my interviewees, who discussed a number of different forms of freedom. Many spoke of freedom from the fear of being caught and repatriated.

Citizenship in South Korea was also discussed as a type of freedom. The freedom that my interviewees referred to also includes mobility, the freedom to choose their work, and to express their thoughts or opinions. Jeongyun said that her freedom made her much more mobile:

“The best thing in South Korea is the freedom to move. I can go wherever and whenever I want. In China, I was very restricted as I was not familiar with the language and geography, but also because of the ever-present risk of being caught. In North Korea, you would need a pass issued from the party to go out of your town. So even if you wanted to visit a neighbouring village, you needed an approval from the party. This takes money and time, and you also need to provide a good reason to persuade the party. Here in South Korea, however, all you need is the fare for transportation. If you can afford it, you can go from Seoul to Busan whenever you want. No one asks for a reason and you do not need one.”

Some of my interviewees also mentioned freedom to choose their workplaces. The male escapees in particular had a tendency to mention their work during the interview. Since North Korea’s national system is based on Confucian patriarchy, males tend to work for production while females are in charge of domestic housework including reproduction. This explains the fact that men were more interested in talking about their work environments. Hak-soo said:

“It was surprising to me that I was paid as much as I worked. In North Korea, the payments were always made in the meal tickets, never in money. Here in South Korea, my happiest thought is that I do not have to starve and that to avoid this, all I need to do is to work enough to pay for food.”

Jeong-ho made a similar comment comparing his life in South Korea with that in China:

“I do not quite understand homeless people in South Korea. Here, you get paid if you work. In China, I worked in a restaurant for more than six months during which the manager did not pay me a penny and insisted instead that I should feel grateful as he did not report me to the police. There are no such wicked evils here and yet people beg for money on the street instead of finding work.”

In the aspects of political and ideological rights, freedom of speech is appreciated and despite having been moved to South Korea by his children, rather than escaping here of his own volition, Ging-ba said:

“I went to a cafe soon after I came to South Korea. I was surprised that people would criticise the president without hesitation. What surprised me more was the fact that no one around them cared about it. In North Korea, if you criticise the government, you would likely be reported and arrested by the police.”

Another interviewee, Chul-jim said that he still found such freedom a little unfamiliar:

“Kim Jong-il’s birthday is a special day on which the government gives out food ration of 100 grams of meat, 50 grams of rice and a bit of sweet candies. I would then bow to the portrait of Kim Jong-il in the living room to thank him for the food. When I first arrived in South Korea, the government gave me 10kg of rice but I did not know whom I should thank for it.”

In the academic literature on North Koreans’ human rights, North Korea is typically depicted as more or less a prison, with all North Korean imagined as leading the lives of prisoners/slaves. As a consequence, North Korean escapees are portrayed as those who have escaped to find “true freedom” which they finally now enjoy in South Korea (Demick, 2010; Harden, 2012; Kim M, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2014).

Yet as shown by Chul-jim’s unease about the suddenly-given freedom and by other interviewees’ narratives above, North Korean escapees think of freedom based on their experiences in three different regimes - namely, the totalitarian dictatorship of the North Korea with which they grew up, the socialism of China in which many stayed temporarily or for long periods, and the liberal capitalism of South Korea in which they finally arrived. The ‘freedom’ described by North Korean escapees is not absolute but relative as it comes from the contrasts between different regimes which they have experienced.

Moreover, some interviewees working for North Korean human rights said that they had not yet fully attained freedom as they often received death threats from other North Koreans who believed that their advocacy for human rights necessarily drew attention to the problems of North Korea, and therefore brought disgrace and were a betrayal of the nation. Hak-dong who escaped from North Korea in 2004 and is now the representative of a well-known NGO brokering to take North Korean escapees from China to South Korea, said:

“I would often start the day in the office by receiving a parcel with blooded axe and a piece of paper saying ‘Traitors to the nation are to be executed’. I would receive such death threats a few times every month. I believe that they were sent by other North Korean escapees. I am not sure if they are real spies or not, but when such threats come through it is quite scary.”

He in fact received so many death threats since he established his NGO that, since 2010, he has had to ask for protection by the South Korean police - as a result, two policemen escort him all the time. Another broker, Jung-su is scared of his phone being tapped as one of his colleagues was caught by a North Korean spy soon after his line was tapped. While smugglers, brokers and NGO activists are afraid of retaliation for their role in aiding North Korean people to escape, which is an assault on the North Korean regime's policy of immobilizing its people, some North Korean escapees who are not involved in such activities still fear that some vengeance may be done to them simply for having escaped from North Korea. In this sense, they feel that their freedom remains constrained and limited.

8.5 *Conclusion*

The narratives of North Koreans who journeyed directly from China to South Korea, via Jik-haeng, particularly the elderly and young escapees' experiences, shed light on the subtleties of migration that is neither entirely driven by their own will nor totally forced by a third party. They witness that their migration came about as a result of acting to the best of their knowledge and awareness in the 'given' circumstances, which reflects the complexity of the realities they faced. There were some early stages where they did not intend to embark on the journey, nor were they well-informed, and yet physical coercion was absent. Their experience adds empirical support to critique that argue the distinction between smuggling and trafficking is too blurry and ambiguous to usefully inform policies to protect the human rights of migrants (Andrijasevic, 2010; Bhabba, 2005; Howard, 2011; Okyere, 2012; Skilbrei and Tveit, 2007). The experiences of North Korean escapees through Jik-haeng provide direct evidence that the assumed dichotomy between forced-trafficked and voluntary-smuggled does not always translate into reality.

North Korean escapees' life in the receiving country, especially in South Korea where they are granted citizenship, continues to challenge the binaries that inform migration policy and scholarship, in particular that of citizen/migrant. Unlike migrants from other countries, as the country has been divided by armistice agreed between 1953 - 1954, North Koreans are almost automatically granted secure citizenship in South Korea after a short decision-over-protection period. While they are widely assumed to then enjoy the status of citizens of South Korea based on their legal citizenship, they perceive themselves unequal to ordinary South Korean citizens. In fact, the hostile atmosphere towards North Koreans that has developed in South Korea over time as a result of the Korean War, and the economic and political particularity of North Korea has added to the social prejudice. North Koreans living

in South Korea consequently face socio-cultural discrimination and racism which militates against self-identification as (South) Korean. At the same time, since they left North Korea with no foreseeable possibility of returning, they do not identify themselves as North Korean either, and rather describe themselves as foreigners or even wanderers or vagabonds. Their lived experiences in South Korea reveals a different and complex dimension of experience that is not fully accounted for by citizen/migrant binary.

North Korean escapees' journey and experiences trouble yet another binary of slavery/freedom. The dominant discourse pictures their movement as the pursuit of liberty similar to that of enslaved people in the United States who historically took the Underground Railroad to escape slavery. Advocates often assume that they have found true freedom in South Korea, a liberal democratic society. While they have indeed escaped from slavery-like circumstances, the liberty they have acquired is still limited. Together with the fact that liberty is always bounded, this reflects a naive and romanticized understanding of 'freedom' as a state of absolute liberty (O'Connell Davidson, 2015).

In sum, the conventional binaries of trafficking/smuggling, forced/voluntary, citizens/migrants and slavery/freedom do not exactly capture the lived experience of my escapee interviewees. In practice, the boundaries between these dichotomous concepts were blurred.

9. CONCLUSION

Forced/voluntary, trafficking/smuggling, slavery/freedom, and citizens/migrants are the conventional binaries and statist categories imposed on certain forms of movement in international laws, migration policies, humanitarian groups' reports, and much academic research. Through the lens of these dominant binaries and categories, North Korean escapees' border-crossing is imagined as 'forced migration' or 'being trafficked', and they are recognized as deserving of assistance and protection because they are considered to be refugees escaping political oppression or victims of trafficking. This thesis has used the experiences of North Korean escapees to highlight problems with these binaries and categories and the flaws in the assumptions that underpin them. It has shown first, that 'trafficking', 'smuggling' and 'asylum-seeking' are not mutually exclusive and do not describe distinct forms of movement but rather overlap. Second, the data presented in this thesis show that 'trafficking' and 'smuggling' are not necessarily organised in the way that dominant policy discourse suggests. According to international law and policy discourse, 'trafficking' is an organised crime undertaken by transnational organized criminal organizations, and 'traffickers' and 'smugglers' are engaged in fundamentally different processes - the former being non-consensual and highly coercive, the latter being a mutual contract agreed between 'smuggler' and voluntary migrant. Yet, in the case of my North Korean interviewees, no such clean distinction can be found. Instead, and as the Korean language suggests, there is just one activity, 'seon', which can be undertaken either dishonestly or honestly, dishonorably or honorably, in bad or good way. 'Victims of trafficking', 'smuggled persons' and 'asylum seekers' are not terms that help us to grasp either the complexities of North Korean escapees' experiences, or the differences between their experiences.

To be more specific, trafficking/smuggling/asylum-seeking assumes that different factors lie behind movement. The trafficked person is imagined as coerced or tricked by criminals; the smuggled person acts voluntarily and for instrumental reasons (usually economic, sometimes for family reunion); the asylum-seeker is forced or driven by political persecution. The first part of this thesis revealed that matters are more complicated for North Korean escapees. There is political persecution in North Korea, but there is also starvation and economic

desperation, and a desire for family reunion in some cases. The political and the economic are entwined and inseparable in North Korean context. And in fact, by moving to avoid starvation, North Koreans become at risk of being forcibly returned and sent to camps - that spectre haunts the journeys they take, and the risks and dangers they are willing to face. My data shows that the economic, political and social are interwoven spheres of life, and in such a context, the idea of a line between 'forced' and 'voluntary' movement is meaningless. North Koreans urgently need to move, and once moved, they even more urgently need to avoid repatriation.

Moreover, North Koreans are of necessity dependent on others to move, but this dependency is more complicated than assumed in discourse on 'trafficking' and 'smuggling'. Their movement is facilitated by a panoply of loosely connected small networks of actors whose motivations range from altruism to extreme greed and willingness to violently exploit. This thesis, particularly chapters four and seven provides an overview of the networks and the different routes out taken by North Koreans, flagging up how each presents different dangers, and creates different degrees of dependency and vulnerability. Within this, journeys out of North Korea and migrants' experience is highly gendered. In this respect, the data both fit and challenge dominant discourse on 'trafficking'. There are cases of forced marriage leading to the most egregious abuses of women's human rights, yet there are also consensual marriages between North Korean women and Chinese men that can likewise result in confinement and severe exploitation and violence - the line between forced and voluntary marriage does not map onto a distinction between violent and non-violent marriage. Moreover, even in the case of extremely violent and exploitative marriages, it is almost invariably true that being returned to North Korea would be a far, far worse fate. And as my data also show, relations between North Korean wives and Chinese husbands are not always characterized by violent control - there can sometimes be affection and care in these relationships.

Dominant discourse on trafficking is very much preoccupied by forms of movement that are not sanctioned by the state, hence the United Nations Trafficking Protocol is attached to the Convention on Transnational Organised Crime. Trafficking is imagined to sit on the illegal side of the legal/illegal migration binary. Again, my interview data disrupts this logic, for whilst it is true that many of my interviewees who were subject to violent control and exploitation in China were, through the eyes of the Chinese authorities, illegal immigrants, male guest workers sent by the North Korean government to labour in Russia are legally present on Russian soil, and yet, as I have shown, their conditions are just as appalling as those endured by irregular North Korean migrants in China.

Another important theme that emerges from the data concerns temporality. Escape from North Korea is a process that takes time, anywhere from a couple of weeks to a decade. This means movement through different types and degrees of dependency, as well as through space and time. The journey is punctuated by periods of immobility, as well as mobility. In trafficking discourse, immobility is violently imposed by wicked trafficker alone. This does certainly happen to many North Korean escapees, but it takes a number of forms. As has been seen in this thesis, North Korean women who use marriage as a strategy to move and live in China (or have marriage forcibly imposed on them) often end up in conditions of close confinement. But even here, it can be the fear of return, rather than use of violence by husbands, that leads women to remain in unwanted marriages in China. Some are in situation where they could, in theory, ‘walk away’ but are simply too terrified to attempt onward movement. North Korean women can be subject to various other forms of forced labour in China, again typically in confined and hidden spaces, and there is ample evidence of their vulnerability to appalling treatment and conditions in these closed settings where a husband or boss exercises almost total control over every aspect of their daily lives. Yet because women can usually remain hidden, they are generally less vulnerable to return than North Korean men working in construction or agriculture. Being hidden away is both a source of violence and exploitation, and a protection against an even worse fate.

Because many North Korean escapees’ journeys to South Korea take place over long periods of time, it is also difficult to fix them as either consensual or non-consensual, voluntary or forced. Consider, for example, the case of elderly parents who were in effect kidnapped, and tricked into leaving North Korea by agents employed by their adult children. At the moment of border crossing, we can say that because they were deceived, they exercised no choice as regards movement. Yet once in China, when they realise they have been tricked, it would in theory be possible for them to refuse to continue and voluntarily hand themselves over to the authorities. Knowing the consequences of so doing, this is a choice that is not a choice, and so they continue to move. It is not the ‘evil trafficker’ who directly holds a gun to their head and forces them on, but rather the North Korean state that indirectly exercises this coercive force.

The thesis has also shown that the conceptual boundary troubles do not end after North Koreans arrive in South Korea. They are still socially and culturally North Koreans despite their formal citizenship of South Korea, and for most, there is huge ambivalence in their feelings about escape. Many North Koreans still have some sense of loyalty, identity and belonging to North Korea, so that escape is not necessarily subjectively experienced as

‘freedom’. For some, it is subjectively experienced more like desertion or betrayal, and for many, it is like being uprooted, living in a limbo, never reaching the journey’s end. For many of my interviewees, reaching South Korea does not feel like escape after all.

In documenting the complexity and ambiguity of North Koreans’ experiences, this thesis has highlighted weaknesses in the conventional binaries of trafficking/smuggling, forced/voluntary, citizens/migrants and slavery/freedom. Recognizing North Korean escapees’ agency, it also reveals that the line between those who were forced to move and those who willingly chose to move is not easily drawn. The issue of agency in the migration literature, particularly with regards to forced migration, has been often discussed, and many academic scholars criticize a tendency to represent migrants as passive victims who lack, or have lost, agency (Schaap, 2011). Agency is defined as individuals’ capacity to act and make their own decisions within the structural constraints operating on them. It is important to note that agency is distinct from autonomy as O’Connell Davidson (2005:78) points out in a discussion of child migration:

...the idea that human beings can be neatly divided into fixed, impermeable groupings defined by their difference from one another - Adult and Child, free worker and slave, voluntary migrant and trafficked person, agent and victim, subject and object - is just that, an idea. In reality, the lines between tyranny and consent, domination and freedom, objectification and moral agency, childhood and adulthood, are not and never have been clear-cut, nor do they map neatly onto one another. Those who are tyrannised and treated as objects are still subjects, still feel their dishonour as keenly as those who are treated as fully autonomous human beings when people experience themselves as objects, it is painful, humiliating and destructive precisely because they are aware of their own consciousness or subjectivity.

The distinction between autonomy and agency is an important issue in understanding my interviewees’ experiences. In dominant discourse and official narratives, North Koreans are often portrayed as objects that have lost agency, as if they are puppets controlled by the structural constraints that surround them. Also, North Korea itself is depicted as a huge prison where a totalitarian dictatorship system holds in which people are prisoners or slaves. In particular, those imprisoned in camps are described as victims of the structures, or objects merely subject to orders (see, for example Demick, 2010; Kim M, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2014). Such accounts are concerned with autonomy rather than agency. While North Koreans’ freedom of religion, job and movement are limited by the totalitarian dictatorship, the fact

that they are described as slaves with no agency in dominant discourse is rooted in the confusion between autonomy and agency. Although their freedom is constrained, some, like my interviewees, nonetheless escaped from the country. In particular, escapees living with illegal status in China constantly change their lives through their own efforts to achieve as best they can within their constrained environments - North Korean women run away from abusive Chinese husbands, or persuade them to cooperate with them, and even bring them to South Korea when they settle. Also, as illustrated in the thesis, although they are often subject to forced labour and exploitation, North Koreans often reflect on their experiences as chosen by them in an effort to improve their own situation.

In the case of the male workers in Russia, they worked hard in the exploitative working conditions - and although described as “slaves” in the dominant discourse they constantly tried to reform the environment, and exert some control over their own lives. The fact they finally moved to South Korea exemplifies the fact they had not “lost their agency”. Even in circumstances where they were most heavily and violently restricted, namely in prison camps, some interviewees found ways to exercise their agency to survive, for instance by deliberately suppressing any thought of food in order not to be driven mad by hunger.

They were purposive actors who made their own choices at any moment they could. My data show that they are not mere objects subject to constraints but active subjects continuously negotiating and transforming what surrounds them. In fact, there have been studies, albeit not many, that show the diverse forms of agency enacted by migrants in very difficult circumstances. Andrijasevic’s (2007) study of migrant sex workers shows that whilst the women in her research were vulnerable to a range of forms of exploitation, they nonetheless used the ‘trafficking’ system in order to realize their aspiration to migrate to West Europe (see also Zheng, 2010). Likewise, Mark Johnson’s (2011, 2015, 2018) study on Filipino migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia who escape the highly restrictive kafala system of sponsorship in order to work freelance testifies to the creative ways in which migrants can exercise agency even in the most adverse circumstances. Such studies show that it is vital to address migrants’ agency and move beyond the conventional and dominant narratives that represent migrants as one-dimensional figures, victims or suffering objects. My own research on North Koreans’ movement to South Korea is in line with and supports the findings of such research.

The thesis thus fills a gap in the academic research and literature on migration of North Korean escapees, and also contributes to scholarships on migration, refugees, trafficking, smuggling, gender and agency studies, migration policy and international human rights laws.

Findings from this study also point to alternative migration policies that could improve the terrible situation of North Korean escapees. Rather than expecting an internal change in the North Korean regime itself as a sending country, the experiences of North Koreans documented in the thesis could hopefully help to encourage change in the countries they travel to. The depiction of North Korean women in China as ‘victims of trafficking’ does not help them to access rights or protections, since neither the Chinese nor the North Korean government admit nor accept that trafficking between the two countries occurs. China simply repatriates North Korean women after some perfunctory investigation, and North Korea punishes those who cross the border no matter what the circumstances. The vast amount of resources that the international community has poured into anti-trafficking over the past two decades has done nothing to improve the situation of North Koreans in China, for it does nothing to address or transform their illegal status, which is chiefly what makes them vulnerable. Instead of pressing North Korea to up its ‘anti-trafficking’ performance, as the US Trafficking in Persons Report does, the international community should be pressing the Chinese government to abide by the 1951 refugee Convention and grant North Koreans asylum seeker status.

Furthermore, international and humanitarian organisations that argue for North Korea’s overseas workers/slaves to be ‘freed’ and sent back to North Korea need to rethink their position. Considering that, although they are exposed to poor working conditions, North Korean migrant workers are not forced to go abroad, a better approach would be to lobby for improvements to their working environments in Russia and elsewhere. Finally, the thesis shows that, although North Korean escapees are granted citizenship in South Korea, they are not fully integrated into society, and this partly reflects the South Korean government’s ambivalence towards the human rights of North Koreans. Since the war has formally not ended and the peace treaty remains to be signed, a hostile social atmosphere toward North Korea is still prevalent throughout South Korean society. The North Koreans’ experience of oppression and suffering in North Korea is often used to emphasize the evil of the North Korean regime. In particular, the catch phrase that ‘they came to overcome hunger’ is adopted to illuminate the economic failure of the country and its denial of fundamental freedoms. In a way, representations of North Korean suffering are consumed by South Koreans for their own satisfaction in the competition between regimes - much the same as during the cold war. The South Korean government has not sufficiently considered how this regime competition frame affects society and the socio-cultural discrimination widely experienced by North Koreans. It has instead simply as assumed that by formally granting them citizenship, North Korean

escapees will miraculously integrate into South Korean society as ordinary South Korean citizens. This thesis suggests that the introduction of a multicultural policy framework that respects the diverse experience and background of North Koreans would be a better way forward. It would make it possible to acknowledge the fact that, despite a shared ethnicity and formal citizenship, North Korean escapees in South Korea are migrants from a different society.

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